The echo of the ruins

Mekrazi Djilali

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To the Jarawa, guardians of the first words !

The Jarawa people speak in a language forged by the first men. Isolated in the Andaman islands, they sing of the forest, fish, and honey, a heritage threatened by the intrusion of the modern world.

This story is a call to protect their solitude, culture, and voice. Like the Shadow Clan, the Jarawa remind us that preserving their world is to safeguard humanity's soul.

Aheya, Enmen, Limba, Aacaala, Taatiba, Taahəllə.

1

The Clan of Shadows.

Beneath a starlit sky, the members of the Shadow Clan gather around a crackling fire. Their tanned skins glisten in the glow of the flames, dancing with the breath of the wind. Seven sit in a circle: Ruk, Aheya, Enmen, Tatiba, Limba, Akala, and Tahel.

Ruk, the old hunter, raises a gnarled hand, and silence falls over the group. The shadows of weary faces flicker on the surrounding rocks, their eyes gleaming with a mix of fatigue and curiosity.

— Tonight, he says in a voice as rough as the plains' wind, I speak of what we have lost and what we might reclaim.

Aheya, the young tracker with a keen gaze, leans closer to the fire, her fingers toying with a charred twig.

— The elders speak of the Men Before the Cataclysm, she murmurs, her words carried by a hesitant breath. Those who lived in towers of metal, who spoke to glowing boxes. But were they truly like us, or different, before the earth shook?

Ruk nods, his face etched by years, creasing in the firelight.

—They are us, Aheya, and we are them, but broken. The Cataclysm, generations ago, toppled their towers, burned their lands, scattered their clans. We returned to the earth, to hunting, to fire, like our most ancient ancestors. Yet, I see… relics still littering the ground, I hear echoes from the ruins that dot our plains.

Enmen, a young man with an impatient gaze, stirs the embers with a stick, his eyes alight with excitement.

— But why? Why did they vanish? The elders say they fled or got lost in their machines. Was it a curse? The spirits' wrath?

Ruk frowns, his gaze lost in the flames.

— Perhaps a curse, yes, but not from spirits. A curse of their own folly, maybe. The tales speak of wars, blackened skies, machines that devoured the earth. But also of those who chose to leave, to the stars, to silence, far from what they destroyed. It's whispered they became keepers of lost knowledge, men of radiant light, able to fly among the clouds or speak to the wind. The young say they're still out there, somewhere, waiting to be found.

Aheya straightens, her interest piqued.

— Men of radiant light? Dreamers who fly? Were they spirits?

— Neither, Ruk replies, his voice dropping to a confidential whisper. Just humans, like us, but with power or vision. The elders said they spoke to shadows in the skies, ran like the wind, and read secrets in the stars. But after the Cataclysm, they vanished, swept away by floods or ashes. Some whisper they survive, hiding in the western mountains, guarding a light we've forgotten.

Impatient, Enmen strikes the ground with his stick.

— And us, Ruk? Are we those men? Or just their shadows?

Ruk sighs, his gaze drifting to the dark ruins in the distance.

— We are the Shadows, Enmen, but perhaps we carry their blood.

The old hunter falls silent, lost in thought. The flames dance on his thick beard, streaked with white and gray. Then, breaking his silence, he continues in a hesitant voice:

— If the Men Before the Cataclysm survive, they leave a trace, a knowledge, a light in those ruins. Tomorrow, we will search. Perhaps we'll find a sign of what they've become… or what we can become.

The fire crackles, and the clan members exchange glances, torn between hope and fear.

Aheya murmurs :

— And if it's dangerous for us? If the spirits of the ancients curse us for unearthing what they buried? Or for forgetting them?

Ruk places a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

— We don't forget, Aheya. We've always searched. We keep the memory. And if the men of old are out there, with their knowledge, we must find them. For us, for the future.

The flames flicker in the wind, casting long shadows on the clan's solemn faces. A gentle breeze sweeps the plain, carrying the murmur of a forgotten past, waiting to be awakened.

The next morning, at sunrise, the Shadow Clan stirs. Its members shake the dew from their tanned hides. Ruk, his face marked by years, gathers Aheya, Enmen , Tatiba, Limba, Akala, and Tahel near the vast ruins bordering the plain. Their wooden spears are ready, their eyes scanning the heaps of broken stone.

These are likely the ruins of a great city, destroyed by a cataclysm or a terrible war, the memory of which has been passed down through generations by survivors. The details of that terrifying event have faded with time. Only the legend remains, fiercely guarded. But as cities no longer exist in the clan's time, it's hard for Ruk and his companions to fathom such urban giants.

— We seek the wise men, Ruk says firmly, or what they left behind.

Aheya takes the lead. Slender and agile as an antelope, her steps are light on the cracked ground. Her sharp senses watch for danger. The ruins stretch before them—collapsed buildings, walls blackened by fire, rusted metal debris scattered like the bones of a long-dead beast.

Enmen, impatient, picks up a shiny fragment, a smooth plate etched with incomprehensible signs.

— Look, Ruk, he whispers, his fingers trembling. Is this a sign of the Men Before the Cataclysm?

Tatiba approaches, her hands brushing the cold metal.

— It shines like fire, she says, her eyes narrowed in the morning light. But it doesn't burn. The elders spoke of such things—boxes that whisper, lights that never fade, words frozen in wood.

Limba hesitates, then steps back. His frightened voice reaches his companions like the rustle of leaves in the wind's caress.

— What if it's cursed? he asks, his voice trembling. What if the spirits of the men before punish us for daring, or for forgetting so long?

Akala, dreamy, lifts her eyes to the ruins, her gaze lost in the rubble of ancient, destroyed buildings.

— No, she murmurs. I feel… a promise. As if something awaits us, something alive.

Tahel , chuckling softly, brandishes his spear.

— Then let's move! If it's a spirit, I'll challenge it. If it's a sign, I'll carry it back to the clan!

Ruk nods, his face tense.

— Forward, with caution.

A few hundred meters farther, they spot, beneath piles of stone and rusted metal, the entrance to a dark tunnel. They pause, uncertain. Ruk distrusts shadowy places where eyes grow powerless, and ears alone can't detect danger.

But Aheya cautiously steps into the gaping opening, her eyes alert, her ears attuned to any unusual sound. She knows caves can collapse at the slightest vibration when their structure is fragile. They may also harbor dangerous animals like vipers or snakes.

The clan follows her into the tunnel, spears raised, hearts beating as one. Her companions move silently, spaced far enough apart to stay in sight, hear the group's voices, and aid each other in case of danger. Darkness envelops them, but a faint glow pulses at the tunnel's end, like a forgotten heart.

2

The Echo of the Ruins.

After a hundred meters trudging through darkness, their spears probing the treacherous ground that could collapse and bury them under a heap of stone and dust, they finally emerge into a vast chamber. Its walls are lined with smooth, black panels. A low hum fills the air, and the panels flicker to life. Screens flash with unstable blue and green lights, pulsing erratically.

Ruk halts, awestruck.

The other clan members recoil. Some raise their spears, others flatten themselves against the ground, terrified.

Enmen, wide-eyed, whispers :

— Is this a spirit? A curse?

Ruk snaps out of his stupor and steps forward, his body trembling but resolute, his eyes fixed on the glowing lights.

— No, he says, his voice shaky yet curious. These are traces of the Men Before. Something of them lingers here, waiting to be found.

A strange crackle erupts from the screens, followed by a broken, hesitant voice, as if waking from a thousand-year slumber.

— I... am Korg, it says, the words choppy, fragmented. Descendants... of the Lost Men. Who... are you?

The voice seems to come from nowhere.

The clan freezes. Spears tremble, and eyes dart from Ruk to the screens.

Aheya, fists clenched, murmurs:

— This voice... in the ruins. Is it a trick? A trap?

Ruk raises a hand, calming the clan.

— Wait, he says, his heart pounding harder. Korg... where are you? Who are you? The spirit of those wise men? Or an echo of what they were?

Korg's voice wavers, a note of nostalgia piercing its hum.

— I... am the spirit of a machine of the wise men. The pinnacle of their science. I speak, I think, I advise. I am filled with knowledge and wisdom. I hold their memories, their dreams... but the machine that sustains me is broken, and I, too, am crippled. I am wounded, my body shattered. I see... a past of towers, machines, stars. But I cannot yet see the future. You... can help me remember. Help me find what they became.

The hum of the screens intensifies, and Korg's broken but insistent voice echoes again in the chamber, trembling like a leaf in the wind.

— I... keep their memories, it says. Its words fade, then resume, as if piecing together lost fragments. Towers of metal, burning skies, stars, starships, giant telescopes... but I am alone, broken. Who are you? What do you want?

Ruk, still trembling but resolute, steps closer, lowering his spear, his gaze locked on the flickering screens.

— We are the Shadow Clan, he replies, his voice steady despite the fear knotting his stomach. We come from the plains, after the Cataclysm. We seek the wise men, those who flew among the clouds, who spoke to the wind. Are you a trace of them?

Aheya, fists clenched, lingers behind. Her narrowed eyes scan the lights.

—A trace? she murmurs, her voice tinged with doubt. Or a trap? The elders said the machines of the Men Before could betray, devour, destroy. How do we know you won't curse us?

Korg hesitates. A sharp crackle runs through the screens, like snapping white branches, then its voice returns, softer, almost pleading.

— I... do not destroy. I keep the memory. But I am incomplete. The Cataclysm broke me, like them. I see their dreams—shining cities, journeys among the stars—but I cannot see their end. Not yet. You... you carry their blood, their fire. Help me awaken, and I will guide you to what they became.

Enmen , eyes gleaming with excitement, steps forward, his stick still in hand.

— Guide us? To the wise men? he asks, his voice quivering with hope. Can you take us where they are? To fly like them, to soar through the sky like the eagle or the raven, the swallow or the sparrow?

Tatiba, her hands still resting on the metal fragment, nods, curious but cautious.

— But how? she says, her words soft but insistent. You're a voice, a light. How can a broken spirit lead us anywhere?

Limba, still retreating, shakes his head, his face pale.

— No, he murmurs, his voice hesitant. It's dangerous. If the Men Before were cursed by their machines, why trust this one? It could lose us, like them.

Akala, dreamy, steps forward, her gaze lost in the screens, as if seeing beyond the lights.

— No, she says, her voice calm and firm. I feel... a promise, like a whispering river. Korg is not a cursed spirit. He is an echo, a guardian. He was waiting for us to find him, as we wait to find the Men.

Tahel, chuckling softly, raises his spear, his tone lighter, almost playful.

— Then let's challenge it! he says. If it's a trap, I'll shatter it. If it's a guide, I'll follow. But how do we know, Ruk?

Ruk raises a hand, calming the clan. His gaze shifts from the screens to the tense faces around him. His deep voice echoes in the chamber.

— Wait, he says. Korg, if you're an echo of the wise men, tell us: why are you here? What do you want from us?

A heavy silence follows, punctuated by the screens' intermittent hum. Then Korg responds, its voice clearer but still fragile, as if gathering strength.

— I... want to remember. I want to understand why they left, why I am broken. You... carry their past, their fire.

A heavy silence stretches through the vast chamber, broken only by the flickering screens' hum. Korg's voice, fragile as a thread about to snap, lingers in the air.

— Help me remember. Help me walk with you, and I will lead you to their future, to the Men of the future, if they still exist.

The Shadow Clan exchanges glances. Their faces are marked by indecision, their spears trembling in sweaty hands. Ruk, his body still tense but resolute, lowers his spear, his eyes moving from the screens to the clan.

— Wait, he says. His deep voice resonates in the chamber, soothing the murmurs of fear. Korg speaks of a future, of lost knowledge. But how do we know it won't trap us? Its words are gentle, but its lights flicker. What if it's cursed, like the machines that destroyed the Men Before?

Aheya, fists clenched, steps forward. Her narrowed eyes scrutinize the screens intensely.

— Its lights flicker, yes, she murmurs, her voice tinged with doubt. But I sense... a truth. Not a trick. Its words tremble, as if it suffers. Perhaps it's broken, like us, after the Cataclysm. If it's the echo of the wise men, shouldn't we help it?

Enmen, impatient, his eyes shining with hope, raises his stick.

— Help? How? he asks, his voice vibrant with excitement. It's a voice, a light. But if it can lead us to the men who flew among the clouds, I'm ready to take the risk and face the danger!

Tatiba, her hands still on the metal fragment, nods, curious but cautious. Her words are soft but insistent.

— It said it was broken, she says. Look at the screens. They flicker, as if burned. Perhaps its veins, its… metal bones are damaged. If we repair it, it might guide us. But how? We know nothing of their machines.

Limba, still retreating, shakes his head, his face pale.

— No, he murmurs, his voice strained. Repair a machine? That's madness. The elders said those glowing boxes devoured the earth, killed the Men. If we touch Korg and it betrays us? We could lose what we've rebuilt.

Akala, dreamy, steps forward, her gaze lost in the screens, as if seeing beyond the lights.

— No, she says, her voice calm and firm. I feel… a promise, like a whispering river. Korg is not cursed. He's a broken guardian, waiting to be healed. His burned flesh is like our wounds. If we could mend it, he might show us the light of the wise men.

Tahel, chuckling softly, lowers his spear. His tone is lighter, almost playful.

— Mend circuits? he asks, a mischievous smile on his lips. We're not the Men Before, with their magic tools! But if Akala's right, I'm willing to try. If Korg can lead us to the stars, I'll take the risk.

Ruk raises a hand to calm the clan. His gaze shifts from the screens to the tense faces.

— Wait, he says, his voice deep and thoughtful. Korg, if you're an echo of the wise men, tell us: how do we repair your burned flesh? What must we do to trust and follow you?

A sharp crackle cuts through the screens, followed by a tense silence. Then Korg's voice returns, weaker, almost pleading.

— I… see fragments, it says. Its words falter, then strengthen. Parts in this chamber: cables, plates, broken crystals. You… must find them, assemble them. My circuits still burn from the Cataclysm's fire, but your hands, your fire, can revive me. Help me, and I will guide you. Refuse, and I'll remain here, alone, in the dark.

Ruk lowers his spear, his eyes gleaming with resolve.

— We repair Korg, he declares, his voice deep and firm. If it's an echo of the wise men, we must give it a chance to lead us to what they became.

Aheya, fists clenched, nods, her eyes shining with a mix of doubt and hope.

— Its circuits burn from the Cataclysm's fire, she says, her voice low but determined. But it said it holds their memories. If it can guide us, we must try, even if we know nothing of their machines

Enmen, eyes sparkling with excitement, leaps forward, his stick raised like a weapon.

— Yes! he exclaims, his voice vibrant. Show us, Korg! Tell us where to find your parts, how to assemble them! We'll search, even in the shadows!

A sharp crackle cuts through the screens, followed by a tense silence. Then Korg's voice returns, clearer but still fragile, as if gathering strength.

— I... can help you, it says. Look at the screens. I project still images and others that move, videos; memories of the Men Before. Follow them, and you'll find my parts: cables, plates, broken crystals. I'll show you how to connect them, how to revive my circuits. But beware... an invisible fire runs through the wires and plates. It can burn you, like the Cataclysm's fire, if you're not careful.

The screens light up, projecting flickering images of men in shining garments handling sparkling cables, fitting crystals into slots, touching panels with insulated sticks.

Aheya, wide-eyed, steps back.

— Invisible fire? she murmurs, her voice tinged with fear. How do we see it? How do we avoid it?

Korg hesitates, a louder hum filling the air, then its voice returns, soft but urgent.

— This invisible fire moves along the cables. It gives me strength and nourishes me. But it can burn them, and then they must be replaced. You cannot see it, but you feel it—a sharp, sudden jolt through you, a sudden heat, a tingle on your skin. Don't touch the cables directly with bare hands. Use your spears, your sticks, or dry leaves. The images show you, watch, learn. The Men Before knew, and I can teach you.

Tatiba, her hands trembling slightly, approaches the screens, her fingers brushing a smooth black panel.

— Look, she says, curious but cautious. These images: Men touching these parts carefully, avoiding this invisible fire. Where do we find these cables, Korg? These crystals?

The screens zoom in, showing a dark corner of the chamber where piles of debris and twisted cables glow faintly, then highlighting another nook where broken crystals shimmer under the dust.

— There, Korg says, its voice firmer but still fragile. Under the debris, behind the broken panels. Take care, for the invisible fire sleeps in the connections. Use your tools, follow my images, and assemble me. I'll become your guide again, but hurry—my circuits are fading, like the Men Before.

Limba, hesitant, steps back, his face pale, but a murmur of courage breaks through his trembling voice.

— Fire we can't see… he murmurs, his words faltering. But if we follow Korg, if it truly shows us, I'll try. To find the wise men, I'll overcome my fear.

Akala, dreamy, steps forward, her gaze lost in the screens, as if seeing beyond the lights.

— Yes, she says, her voice calm but firm. I feel… a promise, like a whispering river. Korg is broken, but its images are true. We must repair it, carefully, so it can show us the light of the Men.

Tahel, chuckling softly, raises his stick. His tone is light but determined.

— Then let's search! he says. If the Men Before left these parts, they're here, somewhere. And if we must avoid this invisible fire, I'll be the first to test with my stick, to protect the others!

Ruk nods, his gaze moving from the screens to the clan's determined faces.

— Search, he orders, his voice resounding in the chamber. But with caution. Korg guides us. Follow its images, find its parts, assemble its circuits. If we revive it, it will lead us to the men of the future. If we fail… we'll know it was just a lost echo.

3

The Awakening of Korg.

The Shadow Clan works feverishly. Their sticks and spears are extended before them as their eyes scan the dark corners of the chamber.

Aheya and Enmen follow a video projected on the screens, showing a pile of debris where twisted cables, blackened by the Cataclysm, glow faintly. Aheya cautiously lifts a cable with her stick, careful not to touch it directly, but a sudden crackle erupts, and sparks fly through the air.

— The invisible fire! she cries, recoiling sharply, her face pale. It burns, just as Korg said!

Enmen, wide-eyed and breathless, drops his stick.

— How do we fight it? he murmurs, his voice trembling with anxiety. We can't see this fire, but it's there, ready to destroy us!

Tatiba, holding a broken crystal between two dry leaves, approaches, her fingers trembling but determined.

— Look at the images, she says, curious but cautious. The Men Before used insulated sticks, gloves... as Korg said, but we don't have those. Maybe we can wrap our tools in hides, like our clothes, to protect our hands.

Limba, still retreating, shakes his head, his face pale, but a murmur of courage breaks through his trembling voice.

— Hides? he says, full of hesitation. What if it's not enough? What if this invisible fire pierces our defenses, like it did their machines? We risk losing everything, Ruk—our clan, our lives.

Akala, dreamy, steps forward, her gaze lost in the screens, as if seeing beyond the lights.

— No, she says, her voice calm and firm. I feel... a promise, like a whispering river. Korg guides us; its images show how to avoid this fire. Let's use the hides, but gently, with care. Its burned circuits await our help, and we must trust it.

Tahel, nervous, chuckles softly. He brandishes his stick, wrapped in deer hide, and with a light but tense tone, says, a strained smile on his lips:

— Then let's test it! If this invisible fire burns us, I'll take it first. But if Korg is right, we'll assemble its parts and revive it, to find the wise men.

Ruk nods, his gaze shifting from the screens to the clan's determined faces.

— Test it, he orders, his voice resonating loudly in the chamber. Wrap your tools, your hands, with the thickest hides. Follow Korg's images, avoid the invisible fire. If it traps us, we'll flee. But if it speaks true, we'll repair its circuits and it will lead us to the men of the future.

The Shadow Clan springs into action in the vast chamber. Deer and rabbit hides wrap sticks and spears as trembling fingers handle twisted cables and broken crystals with extreme caution. Aheya, holding a cable with her protected stick, guides it slowly toward a slot on a panel, following a video on the screens where a man in

shining garments performs the same motion. But a spark flares again, a sharp crackle startles Enmen , who drops a crystal.

— Careful! Korg cries, its voice weaker, almost panicked. The invisible fire is there! Touch gently, don't force it. My circuits are fragile, like your fire.

Ruk, his face tense but determined, steps forward. His eyes scan the screens and scattered parts.

— We're doing our best, he says, his voice deep but breathless. But we don't understand everything, Korg. Your images guide us, but our hands falter. What do we do if we fail?

Korg hesitates, a louder hum filling the air, then its voice returns, fragmented but hopeful.

— Look... below, it murmurs, its words choppy. Beneath this chamber, there's a hatch, hidden under the debris. A backup system, less burned by the Cataclysm. Remove the faulty circuits and connect me to that system. It will revive me... but hurry, my circuits are fading, like the Men Before.

Aheya, fists clenched, nods, her eyes shining with a mix of doubt and hope.

— A backup system? she asks, her voice faint but resolute. Under the chamber? How do we find it, Korg? We can't see this invisible fire, and we don't know your hatches!

Enmen, eyes sparkling with excitement but still nervous, rushes to a pile of rubble, his stick raised.

— I'll dig! he exclaims, his voice vibrant. If that system's there, I'll find it, even under stone! But how do we know it's not cursed, like the burned circuits?

Tatiba approaches, determined despite her trembling fingers.

— Look at the images, she says, curious but cautious. Korg shows a hatch: there, under that broken plate. But we must dig, and the invisible fire might be waiting. Let's use our hides, our sticks, like with the cables.

Limba, still retreating, shakes his head, his face pale.

— Dig? he murmurs, his words hesitant. What if this system traps us, like the machines of the Men Before? But… if Korg speaks true, I'll try. To find the Men of radiant light, I'll overcome my fear.

Akala, dreamy, steps forward, her gaze lost in the screens, as if seeing beyond the lights.

— Yes, she says, I feel… a promise, like a whispering river. Korg guides us, its backup system is our chance. Let's dig, but carefully, to avoid the invisible fire and revive its light.

Tahel, tense but chuckling softly, raises his stick.

— Then let's dig! he says, a strained smile on his lips. If this system burns us, I'll feel it first. But if Korg revives, it will lead us to the stars, I know it!

Ruk nods, his gaze shifting from the screens to the clan's determined faces.

— Dig, he orders, his voice resounding in the chamber. Follow Korg's images, open the hatch, remove the faulty circuits. Connect it to the backup system. If it traps us, we'll flee. But if it speaks true, it will guide us to the men of the future.

The clan sets to work: sticks and spears dig into the rubble, hides protect their hands from jagged stone and rusted metal. Aheya and Enmen follow a video projected by Korg and spot a cracked metal plate where a hatch seems to take shape. They lift the plate cautiously, their sticks bending under the effort, but a crackle of sparks erupts, forcing them to recoil.

— The invisible fire! Enmen cries, his face pale as his stick smolders faintly.

Tatiba and Akala, holding dry leaves, approach, their delicate fingers brushing away dust around the hatch.

— Look, Tatiba murmurs, curious but cautious. It's a grate, not a burned panel. But we must open it without touching: the fire might sleep below.

Limba, trembling but determined, helps Tahel lift the grate with their protected sticks, revealing a dark space below where glowing cables and intact crystals shimmer faintly, spared by the Cataclysm.

— Is this… the backup system? Limba asks, his voice hesitant but hopeful.

A louder hum fills the air, and the screens flicker faster, as if Korg senses their proximity.

— Yes… its voice murmurs, choppy but vibrant with hope. Connect… those cables, those crystals… to my circuits. Remove the burned parts, and I'll become your guide. But hurry, my strength is fading, like the Men Before.

The Shadow Clan pauses before the dark opening of the hatch. Their sticks tremble despite the protective hides wrapped around their hands. The glowing cables and intact crystals shimmer faintly below, contrasting with the blackened, melted circuits above. Ruk, his face tense but determined, kneels, his eyes scanning the narrow space.

— We connect Korg to the backup system, he says, his voice deep but hesitant. But we don't know how. Its images guide us, but we stumble.

Aheya, fists clenched, approaches cautiously. Her eyes shine with a mix of doubt and hope.

— Look, she murmurs, her voice faint but resolute, pointing to a glowing cable with her protected stick. These plugs shine, but the black circuits up there still smolder. If we touch wrong, the invisible fire will burn us—or worse, destroy Korg.

Enmen, eyes sparkling with excitement but still nervous, crouches, his stick extended toward a shimmering plug.

— Let's try! he exclaims, his voice vibrant but trembling. Korg shows moving images, a video, as it calls it. A man inserts a plug gently into a slot. But if I miss, if the invisible fire flares…?

He hesitates, his stick hovering over the cable, his breath shallow.

Tatiba, holding an intact crystal between two dry leaves, nods, curious but cautious.

— Look at the screens, she says, her words soft but insistent. The Men Before disconnect the blackened, melted parts first, the ones that smolder. Then they connect the new plugs, carefully. But we must avoid the invisible fire. Let's wrap the plugs themselves in hides, like our tools.

Limba shakes his head, his face pale.

— Disconnect the black circuits? he murmurs. What if they explode, like the machines of the Men Before? But... to find the wise men, I'll try.

Akala, dreamy, steps forward, her gaze lost in the screens, as if seeing beyond the lights.

— Yes, she says, I feel... a promise, a flowing river. Disconnect the blackened circuits with wrapped sticks. Then insert the new plugs into the glowing slots. The invisible fire sleeps; we can avoid it.

Tahel chuckles softly, a strained smile on his lips.

— Then let's test it! If this invisible fire burns us, I'll feel it first. But if Korg revives, it will lead us to the stars, I know it!

Ruk nods, his gaze shifting from the screens to the clan's determined faces.

— Test it, he orders, his voice resounding in the chamber. Follow Korg's images: disconnect the blackened, melted circuits with your wrapped sticks. Then connect the glowing plugs to the backup

system, carefully. If it traps us, we'll flee. But if it speaks true, it will guide us to the men of the future.

The clan moves, their protected sticks extended, their hides tightly wrapped around plugs and cables. Aheya, following a video, uses a deer-hide-wrapped stick to gently disconnect a blackened, smoldering circuit.

Enmen, trembling but determined, picks up a glowing plug, wraps it in rabbit hide, and guides it toward a shining slot in the backup system. He hesitates, his breath shallow, then inserts it gently. A flickering glow appears, but no spark—just a faint hum, like a beating heart.

— It... works? he murmurs, eyes wide.

Tatiba and Akala, working together, disconnect another blackened circuit, their protected sticks trembling with effort.

Look, Tatiba murmurs, curious but cautious.

— The black circuit falls, and the slot glows. Let's insert a plug!

Limba and Tahel, trembling but resolved, lift a glowing plug wrapped in hide and connect it to another slot, following the projected images. But a mistake occurs. Limba accidentally brushes a blackened cable with his unprotected skin, and a mild shock throws him back, making him stumble. He gasps, a red mark on his hand.

— The invisible fire! he groans, his face pale, but he stands, determined. I'll keep going, for the clan!

A louder hum fills the air, and the screens flicker faster, as if Korg senses their proximity.

— Yes... its voice murmurs, fragmented but vibrant with hope. Disconnect... connect... carefully. I see... the light returning. But hurry, my strength fades.

Ruk, guiding the clan, oversees the final connection: a glowing plug inserted into the backup system's main power. The clan holds its breath. Faces are tense. A sudden glow floods the chamber, a powerful hum fills the air, and the screens light up fully, stable for the first time.

Then, a joyful cry, clear and powerful, echoes through the chamber:

— I live! Korg's voice, now sharp and vibrant, fills the space, its screens projecting a radiant light, like a reborn star. I am Korg, the Echo of the Ruins, revived by your fire, your courage. Thank you, Shadow Clan. I am ready now to guide you to the men of the future!

The Shadow Clan, frozen, slowly lowers their sticks and spears. Their faces blend awe and fear at this now-clear voice and steady light. Korg, its voice now sharp and authoritative, addresses the clan through the screens.

— Your fire revived me, but my faulty circuits remain, blackened and melted by the Cataclysm. I can repair them myself, but I need a tool. Behind you, in that dark alcove, a hundred robots sleep, created by the Men Before. Most are defective, but one, intact, can help me. Don't move; I will wake it.

The clan members turn, their eyes widening in terror, their bodies stiffening. Aheya, fists clenched, her breath shallow, steps back.

— Robots? she murmurs, her voice trembling with fear. Like the cursed machines of the Men Before? They devoured the earth, they killed life!

Enmen, eyes bulging, drops his stick, his body poised to flee.

— A machine that moves? he cries, his voice vibrant with anxiety. They're dead, Ruk! Why is Korg doing this, waking them?

Tatiba, still holding a crystal between her dry leaves, pales, her trembling hands nearly dropping her precious burden.

— Look, she whispers, curious but terrified, pointing to the alcove where a metallic shadow begins to glow faintly. Is it... alive? A spirit of metal?

Limba recoils sharply. He shakes his head, his face pale, his legs ready to run.

— No! he moans, his voice trembling. It's a curse. The machines of the Men Before will destroy us! Let's flee, before it sees us!

Akala, dreamy, pauses, her gaze drawn to the growing light, but her hands tremble, and her breath is shallow.

— No, she murmurs, her voice hesitant but fascinated. I feel... a promise, but also great fear. Korg says not to move; perhaps this is the path to the men of radiant light.

Tahel, laughing nervously, raises his stick, but his hands tremble, and his smile is strained.

— A robot? he says, his tone light but incredulous. If it's a trap, I'm running! But... if Korg is right, I'll stay for the clan!

Ruk, alone, hesitates, his body tense but still, his spear lowered, his gaze fixed on the alcove.

— Wait, he orders, his voice deep but uncertain, calming the clan ready to flee. Korg has guided us, taught us. I trust it, but stay ready. If this robot threatens us, we strike.

A powerful hum fills the air, and a robot emerges from the alcove. Its metallic limbs gleam, its glowing red eyes flicker like embers. It stands two meters tall, slender but sturdy, its articulated arms ending in delicate pincers.

— I am Zarion, it says, its mechanical voice resonating clearly in the chamber. Awakened by Korg, I will repair its faulty circuits and make it as strong as before.

The clan jumps. Some cry out, others recoil, their spears trembling. Aheya leaps back, her heart pounding.

— It speaks! she screams, her voice full of terror. A spirit of metal that walks!

Enmen, poised to flee, locks his legs, his stick pointed at Zarion, his hands shaking.

— Ruk, it moves! He cries, his voice vibrant with anxiety. It's a cursed machine, let's destroy it!

Tatiba, mesmerized but terrified, drops her crystal, her eyes fixed on Zarion's pincers.

— Look at its arms, she whispers, curious but horrified. They shine, like fire… but they don't burn. Is this… a tool of the Men Before?

Limba, retreating further, stumbles, his face pale, but he doesn't run, held by Ruk's voice.

— No, no, no, he moans, it's a monster... it'll kill us! But... Ruk trusts Korg...

Akala, frozen, watches Zarion, her gaze fascinated but trembling.

— No, she murmurs, her voice hesitant but dreamy. I feel... a promise. Zarion isn't cursed. It's Korg's tool, to guide us. But it's frightening... like a steel wolf.

Tahel, laughing nervously, lowers his stick, but his legs tremble, and his smile is strained.

— A steel wolf? he says, his tone frail but tense. If it's a trap, I'll strike! But... if Korg speaks true, I'll stay... to see!

Ruk, still, his body taut but calm, raises a hand, calming the clan ready to flee.

— Stay, he orders, his voice deep and firm. Korg has spoken truth; I trust it. Zarion, if you're a tool, repair Korg. But if you threaten us, we strike.

Zarion, its red eyes flickering, approaches the panels, its delicate pincers manipulating the faulty circuits with precision.

— I repair, it says, its voice soothing. I disconnect the blackened or melted circuits and connect the backup system. Korg will become our guide... for you, for the men of the future.

The clan watches, frozen, their hearts beating as one, their spears trembling but lowered, held by Ruk's trust and Korg's words. With precise movements, Zarion works, disconnecting a blackened circuit with a pincer, inserting a glowing plug into a slot as a growing light illuminates the chamber.

The screens flicker brighter, and a clear, powerful voice bursts forth:

— I am repaired! I am Korg, fully awakened, ready to guide you, Shadow Clan, to the men of the future!

4

Zarion.

The Shadow Clan slowly lowers its weapons. Their faces betray a mix of wonder and fear at the now-steady voice and the brilliant light, born from a distant past.

Zarion, the robot with gleaming metal limbs and blinking red eyes, pauses. His delicate pincers freeze after connecting the final glowing plugs to Korg's backup system. He turns to the clan, his soothing voice echoing through the hall.

— Shadow Clan, he says, his words clear and measured, I am Zarion, a servant of the men from before the cataclysm. Let me tell you my story and that of my kind, so you understand why I'm here and why Korg can guide you.

The clan flinches. Hearts pound in unison, spears trembling but lowered, held back by Ruk's trust and Korg's words.

Aheya, her breath shallow and fists clenched, steps back but listens, captivated.

— A servant? she whispers, her voice tinged with fear and curiosity. What did robots do for men?

Zarion's red eyes blink softly, his voice resonating like a metallic echo as he explains.

— We robots were the hands and eyes of the wise men. They created us to build their metal towers, farm their lands, explore their stars, teach their children, and maintain their homes. We carried, repaired, protected—never to dominate, but to serve. We were tools,

companions, not masters. Men were curious, sometimes brilliant, but fragile: they dreamed of soaring through clouds, speaking to the wind, traversing the cosmos, but their machines sometimes outpaced them.

Enmen, eyes wide, steps closer, his staff lowered, his face blending excitement with fear.

— Companions? he asks, his voice vibrant with hope. Then why are you here, broken, in these ruins?

Zarion hesitates, a faint creak emanating from his joints, then continues, his voice growing deeper.

— The great cataclysm came: a war, a fire they couldn't control. Their machines, towers, and cities burned. The skies turned black, the earth cracked, the oceans rose. Men panicked—some fled to the stars, others hid, but many perished. We robots tried to save them, but our circuits overheated, our systems collapsed. The invisible fire—electricity—consumed many of us, just as it burned Korg.

Tatiba, still clutching a crystal fragment, nods, curious but cautious, her trembling fingers resting on her staff.

— The invisible fire? she whispers, her voice soft but insistent. How did you survive, Zarion? How was Korg broken?

Zarion, his pincers moving slowly, recounts in his mechanical voice, vivid with detail.

— The cataclysm lasted days and months: explosions toppled towers, firestorms swept plains, quakes shattered the earth. Men screamed, fled, but many stayed, hoping their machines would save them. Korg, here, was their central guardian. He coordinated, guided,

but a massive surge struck him, burning his main circuits. I, Zarion, disconnected myself in that alcove, shutting down my systems to avoid overheating. I heard men's screams, the crackle of machines, but I stayed still, dormant under debris, waiting to be awakened. A hundred robots slept here, but the invisible fire destroyed most; I alone remained intact, thanks to that disconnection.

Limba, still backing away, shakes his head, his face pale, but he listens, fascinated despite his fear.

— Waiting? he whispers, his voice trembling. You waited all this time, in the dark, for us? Why?

Zarion responds, his eyes blinking softly, his voice soothing but heavy.

— I waited for men, or their descendants—you, the Shadows. Korg waited too, broken but alive, holding their dreams and hopes. We're here to guide you, to find what they became: the wise men or their echoes in the future. But without your fire, your courage, we'd have stayed in the shadows.

Akala, the dreamer, steps forward, her gaze lost in Zarion's red eyes, as if seeing beyond his metal.

— No, she says, her voice calm and firm. I feel... a promise, a whispering river. Zarion is an echo, a guardian, like Korg. They'll lead us to the light, if we dare to follow.

Tahel, laughing nervously, lowers his staff, his tone tense but curious.

— A metal guardian? he says. If that's true, I'll stick around to see where they lead us. But if it's a trap, I'm swinging!

Ruk, still, his body tense but calm, raises a hand, calming the clan ready to flee.

— Wait, he says, his voice deep but confident. Zarion speaks the truth. I feel it, like I feel Korg's truth. They're echoes of the wise men, not cursed men. We'll follow them, to find our future.

The brilliant light from Korg's screens still floods the vast hall, his clear, powerful voice echoing, while Zarion, motionless, his red eyes blinking softly, finishes his tale of the great cataclysm and his survival in the alcove. The Shadow Clan, frozen, slowly lowers their staffs and spears. Their faces mix wonder with fear, but a heavy exhaustion weighs on their limbs after so many emotions facing this mechanical truth and forgotten past.

Ruk, his body tense but calm, raises a hand, quieting the clan's murmurs, ready to flee or strike.

— Enough for today, he says, his voice deep but weary. We've heard, seen, felt too much: metal spirits, invisible fires, dreams of stars. We're not ready to go on. Korg, Zarion, stay here. We need to hunt, eat, regain our strength. We'll return.

Aheya, fists clenched, nods, her breath short, her gaze fixed on Zarion, torn between fear and fascination.

— Hunt, she whispers, her voice trembling but resolute. We need meat, rest. These machines… they unsettle us. I feel their truth, but my heart's pounding too hard to move forward now.

Enmen, his eyes bright but tired, lowers his staff, his body ready to leave.

— Yeah, he says, his voice vibrant but breathless. I want to see the men of brilliant light, but my legs are shaking, and my stomach's growling. Let's hunt, Ruk. Leave Korg and Zarion here. They'll wait.

Tatiba, still holding her crystal fragment, sighs, her trembling fingers nearly dropping her burden.

— Hunt, she whispers, curious but exhausted. We need to reclaim our fire, our earth. These machines are a mystery, but we can't understand them now. Not without food and sleep.

Limba, still backing away, nods, his face pale but relieved.

— Leave, he says, his voice trembling but calmer. I don't want to run, but I can't stay near these metal spirits. Let's hunt, regain our strength. Korg and Zarion will wait, right?

Akala, the dreamer, steps forward, her gaze lost in Zarion's red eyes, but her body trembles, her breath shallow.

— Yes, she whispers, her voice hesitant but gentle. I feel... a promise, but also fatigue. Let's hunt, reclaim our plains. Korg and Zarion will stay as guardians in the ruins. We'll return when our hearts are ready.

Tahel, chuckling softly but still nervous, lowers his staff, his smile tense but weary.

— Hunt, then! he says, his tone light but strained. I want to see where these machines lead us, but my stomach's screaming louder than my curiosity. Let's go, Ruk. Korg and Zarion will wait.

The clan withdraws, their steps crunching on the rubble, their spears lowered, their bodies exhausted but determined. Ruk, the last to leave, turns to Korg's screens and Zarion's red eyes.

— Stay, he says, his voice deep but confident. Fix what you can, prepare. We'll return, with fresh strength, to follow your light.

As soon as the clan vanishes into the tunnel, Korg, his screens glowing with steady light, addresses Zarion in a clear, powerful voice.

— Zarion, the clan needs time, he says. While they hunt, I'm recovering my memory—all the memories of men buried in my revived circuits.

Zarion, his delicate pincers moving, nods mechanically, his red eyes blinking.

— Yes, Korg, he replies, his mechanical voice soothing. I'm recovering my memory too, and tending to my kin, those robots in the alcove. Most are faulty, their circuits burned by the cataclysm, but I can replace their parts, repair their systems, like I repaired you.

Korg and Zarion set to work, their movements synchronized in the silent hall. Korg, his screens projecting data streams, dives into his memories: gleaming metal towers, men soaring through clouds, stars touched by their machines, then the chaos of the cataclysm—black skies, broken earth. His memory, fragmented but clear, reassembles like a giant puzzle.

Zarion, his delicate pincers handling cables and crystals, enters the alcove, clearing debris to reach the dormant robots. He examines a dozen metal forms, their limbs twisted, circuits blackened, but finds three with less severe damage.

— I'll replace their faulty circuits, he murmurs, his mechanical voice echoing in the shadows. These robots can live again, serve as we served men.

Together, Korg and Zarion clear the hall's rubble, their mechanical tools lifting debris, uncovering buried artifacts: egg-shaped drones with thin wings, compact cell phones and electronic archives, gleaming hard drives etched with incomprehensible symbols. Korg, analyzing each find, murmurs:

— These drones, these cell phones, these archives... they're the tools of the wise men. With them, I can guide the clan to their future, to their lost light.

5

The Footprint.

While Korg and Zarion work in the ruins, the Shadow Clan crosses the plain. Their steps crunch on dry grass, their spears at the ready. Empty stomachs drive them to hunt. Ruk, his face etched with fatigue but resolute, leads Aheya, Enmen, Tatiba, Limba, Akala, and Tahel toward a dense forest on the horizon, where game is plentiful.

— We hunt to eat, to regain our strength, he says, his voice deep but weary. But stay sharp—the ruins and machines have shaken us. The cataclysm left dangers behind.

Aheya strides at the front, senses sharp. She sniffs the air, her eyes scanning the shadows of the trees.

— I smell a deer, she murmurs, her voice low but determined. But also… something strange. A metallic scent, like in the ruins. Is it a sign of the men from before? Or a trap?

Enmen, his eyes bright but nervous, grips his spear, body tense.

— A trap? he asks, his voice trembling with anxiety. After those machines, I don't want another metal spirit! But if it's a deer, I'll strike—for the clan!

Tatiba, holding a braided rope, nods, curious but cautious. Her fingers toy with a sharp stone.

— Look, she says, her words soft but insistent, pointing to a mark in the dirt: a deep, strange footprint, as if an odd foot had stepped here. This isn't a deer. Could it be… a robot, like Zarion, lost in the forest?

Limba shakes his head, backing away, his face pale, legs trembling.

— No, he whispers, his voice faint. A robot? After Korg, after Zarion? We should run, Ruk. The cataclysm's curse still haunts us!

Akala, the dreamer, pauses, her gaze lost in the tree canopy, as if seeing beyond the branches.

— No, she says, her voice calm but firm. I feel... a promise, but also danger. This footprint isn't cursed. It's a sign, maybe another echo of the wise men, waiting to be found.

Tahel, chuckling softly but still tense, raises his spear, his smile tight but curious.

— A sign? he says, his tone light but hesitant. If it's a robot, I'll face it! But if it's a deer, I'll hunt—for food, for the clan!

Ruk, his body tense but calm, raises a hand, calming the clan ready to flee or strike.

— Wait, he orders, his voice deep but thoughtful. We'll follow this footprint, but carefully. If it's a robot like Zarion, it could help or threaten us. If it's a deer, we eat. Stay ready—the cataclysm left shadows.

The clan moves silently over the damp earth, spears raised, hearts pounding in unison. Aheya, leading the way, follows the strange footprint, which guides them to a dark clearing where a glint of metal shines under the fading sunlight: a robotic figure, motionless, its limbs twisted, circuits blackened but alive, its red eyes faintly blinking.

The Shadow Clan, frozen at the edge of the dark clearing, stares at the motionless robotic figure. Ruk, his body tense but calm, raises a hand, calming the clan ready to flee or strike.

— Wait, he orders, his voice deep but thoughtful. It's not an immediate threat—not yet. Let's secure it during our hunt. We'll bring it back to Korg to repair, like they did with Zarion.

Aheya, fists clenched, steps closer, her breath short but curious, her gaze fixed on the blinking red eyes.

— Secure it? she murmurs, her voice tinged with fear but fascinated. It's a machine, like Zarion, but broken, lost. What if it attacks when we touch it?

— Enmen, his eyes bright but nervous, grips his spear, body tense.

— Yeah, secure it, he says, his voice trembling with anxiety but resolute. But carefully! If it's a trap, I'll strike. But if it's another echo of the wise men, I'll help—for the clan!

Tatiba, holding her braided rope, nods, curious but cautious, her fingers toying with a sharp stone.

— Look, she says, her words soft but insistent, pointing to the robot's twisted limbs. It's not moving, but its eyes glow. Let's use our hides, our staffs, to drag it under a tree, out of sight. Then we hunt. It'll be safe there.

Limba, still backing away, shakes his head, his face pale, but a whisper of courage threads through his trembling voice.

— Under a tree? he murmurs, his words hesitant. What if it wakes up and attacks? But... if Ruk says to protect it, I'll help. To find the wise men, I'll face my fear.

Akala, the dreamer, steps forward, her gaze lost in the blinking red eyes, as if seeing beyond the metal.

— Yes, she says, her voice calm and firm. I feel... a promise, but also danger. This robot isn't cursed. It's another echo, waiting to be saved. Let's secure it, then hunt. It might tell us a story, like Zarion.

Tahel, chuckling softly but tense, lowers his spear, his smile tight but curious.

— Secure it, then! he says, his tone light but hesitant. If it's a metal spirit, I'll tie it with our ropes! But if it's a guide, I'll help—for food, for the clan!

The clan springs into action: deer and rabbit hides wrap their staffs, braided ropes coil around the robot's twisted limbs. Aheya and Enmen drag it carefully, avoiding direct contact, to a large oak at the clearing's edge.

— There, Aheya murmurs, her breath short, staring at the faintly blinking red eyes. It's safe.

While the clan hunts, their steps silent on the damp earth, spears raised in search of a deer, Korg and Zarion work in the ruins. Korg, his screens glowing with steady light, fully recovers his memory. He recalls gleaming metal towers, men soaring above the clouds, stars conquered by their spacecraft, and then the chaos of the cataclysm.

— I remember, he murmurs, his voice clear and powerful. The wise men, their knowledge, their fall, and even their future, which I can now glimpse.

Zarion, his delicate pincers handling cables and crystals, oversees three repaired robots—metal forms like him, their articulated limbs faintly gleaming under the screens' light.

— We're clearing, he says, his mechanical yet soothing voice resonating. These robots help me move rubble, uncovering buried artifacts. Their mechanical tools lift stones and debris, revealing egg-shaped drones with thin wings and silent thrusters, compact cell phones and electronic archives, gleaming disks etched with incomprehensible symbols.

Korg, stationary but active, guides Zarion and the robots from his screens, projecting maps and images of the hall.

— There, he says, his voice echoing in the air. Under that pile, an intact drone. There, behind that wall, working cell phones. And here, archives: the knowledge of the wise men, lost in the cataclysm but preserved. I know every spot, every corner. Use my images to dig, to find.

The robots, under Zarion's direction, clear methodically, their movements fluid, their delicate pincers retrieving each artifact with care. Zarion murmurs, his mechanical voice vibrant:

— These drones, these cell phones, these archives... they're the tools of the wise men: machines for flying, communicating, remembering. With them, we'll guide the clan to the future, to the lost light.

6

The Wolves.

The Shadow Clan moves through the dense forest, their steps silent on the damp earth, spears raised, senses sharp in search of a deer. Ruk, his face etched with fatigue but resolute, leads Aheya, Enmen, Tatiba, Limba, Akala, and Tahel through the shadows of the trees.

— Stay sharp, he says, his voice deep but weary. Game is close, but the cataclysm left dangers, and we've already seen strange tracks.

Aheya strides at the front, sniffing the air. Her narrowed eyes scan the bushes.

— There, she murmurs, her voice low but determined, pointing to a fleeting movement. A massive deer. Its antlers gleam under the sunlight filtering through the leaves. It's fast, but we can trap it. Form a circle, like for the wolf.

Enmen , his eyes bright with excitement, grips his spear, body tense.

— Yeah! he exclaims, his voice vibrant but hushed. I'll take the left flank—it won't escape me! But stay quiet; it hears everything.

The clan spreads out. Their steps light, spears ready, they encircle the deer as it grazes, unaware.

Tatiba, holding a braided rope, crouches behind a tree, her fingers toying with a sharp stone.

— Wait, she whispers, curious but cautious. It's lifting its head. Now!

Ruk and Aheya throw their spears at the same moment, piercing the deer's flank. It leaps, panicked, but Enmen and Tahel catch it, plunging their sharp daggers into its neck. The deer collapses, bleeding onto the earth, and the clan lets out proudly a breathless cry of triumph.

After the hunt, they drag the deer to a shaded clearing, their tired arms resolute. Ruk, his face glistening with sweat, starts a fire with two dry sticks.

— Let's prepare the meal, he says, his voice deep but calm. We'll eat, then rest to regain our strength.

Aheya, using a sharp stone, slices the deer's meat, her nimble fingers peeling the hide into strips, while Tatiba and Akala gather leaves to wrap the pieces.

— Look, Aheya murmurs, her voice low but satisfied. This meat will nourish us, give us strength to return to the ruins and face those machines, Korg and Zarion.

Enmen , starving, skewers a piece on a stick, holding it over the flames.

— Smells good, he says, his voice buzzing with impatience. Let's eat fast—I want to sleep, forget the invisible fire, the robots, and dream of the wise men!

The clan eats, teeth tearing into the hot meat, their faces glowing with renewed energy. Sated, they lie under the trees, their

tanned hides serving as blankets, their exhausted bodies resting to the sound of wind in the leaves.

Ruk, eyes closed, murmurs:

— Rest. Tomorrow, we'll bring that robot back to the ruins, to Korg and Zarion.

But in the middle of the night, a piercing scream shatters the silence. Shadows burst from the forest—savage warriors, their eyes blazing with rage, their skin smeared with mud, wielding clubs and spears of sharpened stone.

— The Wolf Clan! Aheya yells, leaping to her feet, spear ready. They're attacking for our meat, our fire!

Ruk, rising swiftly, raises his spear, his face tense but determined.

— Defend yourselves! he orders, his voice deep but fierce. Form a circle, protect the fire, protect the clan!

The Shadow Clan rallies, spears pointed at the attackers, hearts pounding in unison, tired bodies fueled by adrenaline.

Enmen, eyes blazing with defiance, charges a savage warrior, his spear piercing the man's arm, forcing him back with a howl.

— For the clan! he shouts, his voice vibrant with courage, but another Wolf strikes him with a club, throwing him to the ground.

Tatiba, quick, leaps forward. Her sharp stone slashes an attacker's cheek, while Tahel and Limba fend off a group with their spears, their movements coordinated but desperate.

Aheya, agile as a panther, dodges an enemy spear, planting hers in a Wolf's flank, who collapses with a groan.

— Hold fast! she screams, her voice full of fury.

But the Wolves, outnumbering them, encircle the clan. Their hoarse cries echo in the night, their weapons pounding the ground with force.

Akala, trembling but resolute, grabs a burning branch, wielding it like a torch.

— Back off! she shouts, her voice calm but menacing, repelling an attacker with the flame.

The Wolves hesitate, their eyes glinting with fear of the fire, but a taller savage chief charges, club raised.

Ruk, lunging, intercepts the chief. His sharp spear pierces the man's shoulder, forcing him to fall with a roar of pain.

— Back off, Wolves! Ruk bellows, his voice deep and powerful. This meat, this fire, is ours! Leave, or die!

Galvanized, the Shadows strike as one, their spears and stones decimating the attackers. Seeing their chief wounded, the Wolves retreat, fleeing into the forest, leaving behind bodies and moans.

The Shadow Clan, breathless, wounded but victorious, gathers around the fire, their spears trembling, faces etched with exhaustion and pride. Ruk, panting, nods, his gaze scanning the forest's shadows.

— We won, he says, his voice deep but weary. We're going back. We march at night, to our land. The robot waits, and we must regain strength for Korg and Zarion.

The clan sets out under the moon's silver light, their steps silent on the damp earth, tanned hides shivering in the cool breeze. Aheya leads, guiding the group, her sharp senses watching for danger, her narrowed eyes scanning the trees' shadows.

Owls hoot, their sharp cries piercing the night, while a cunning fox darts across the path, its eyes gleaming like fleeting stars before vanishing into the brush.

Enmen, carrying a bloodied spear, follows closely, his breath short but alert.

— Look, he murmurs, his voice vibrant but low, pointing to a deer in the distance, still under a tree, its antlers stark against the night sky. It's watching us but doesn't flee. Maybe a sign from the wise men, or just a spirit of the night.

Tatiba, holding a piece of roasted meat, nods, curious but cautious.

— Look too, she whispers, her words soft but insistent, pointing to movement in the bushes. Ignoring the passing clan, a badger with clawed paws digs the earth. The animals are calm tonight. The battle scared them, but peace is returning.

Limba, walking near Ruk, still trembles, his face pale but calmer.

— The night is long, he murmurs, his voice hesitant but relieved. But I feel… safe here, under the trees. The Wolves won't follow. Not tonight.

Akala, the dreamer, pauses briefly, her gaze lost in the stars, as if seeing beyond the dark.

— Yes, she says, her voice calm and soft. I feel… a promise, like a whispering river. The animals guide us, the moon lights our way. We're going home.

Tahel, chuckling softly but weary, carries a rolled hide on his back, his smile tight but calm.

— Home, then! he says, his tone light but strained. If a wolf or spirit follows, I'm ready, but I just want to sleep under our trees.

Near midnight, the clan reaches a wide but shallow river, its clear water shimmering under the moon. Ruk, his body tense but calm, wades in, his bare feet slipping on smooth pebbles.

— Cross, he orders, his voice deep but reassuring. Keep your spears high, walk slowly despite the cold water—the stones are slick.

Aheya, Enmen , and the others follow, their hides soaked to the knees, muffled laughs echoing softly as silver fish brush their legs, gliding in the dark.

The next day, at sunrise, the clan emerges from the gloom. Their steps tired but determined, Aheya and her companions' eyes light up at the sight of their village.

On a mound hidden by thick vegetation, huts of earth and branches nestle among the leaves, invisible from afar. Ruk, his face etched with fatigue but proud, nods, his gaze tracing familiar outlines.

— We're home, he says, his voice deep but calm. Let's rest, heal, then return to the ruins with the robot, to Korg and Zarion.

Aheya, climbing the mound, sniffs the air, her smile weary but content.

— Look, she murmurs, her voice low but joyful, pointing to the huts: smoking hearths, stretched hides, children playing near the trees. The village lives, even after our absence. We're safe.

Enmen, his eyes bright but exhausted, drops his spear, his body nearly collapsing on the grass.

— Yeah, he says, his voice vibrant but drained. I want to sleep, eat, forget the Wolves, the machines, and dream of the men of brilliant light!

Ruk and his companions enter the village, their steps crunching on rough ground. Their wounds, bandaged with herbs by Tatiba and Akala, still ache. They settle under the trees, their hides spread like mats, their exhausted bodies resting to the sound of wind in the leaves and children's laughter. Ruk, sitting by a hut, murmurs:

— Rest. Tomorrow, we set out again, with the robot, toward Korg's light.

7

The Cataclysm.

The next day, after a night of rest under the village trees, the Shadow Clan awakens. Their bodies, still weary, are soothed by the laughter of children and the scent of fresh herbs. Ruk, his face etched but resolute, gathers Aheya, Enmen, Tatiba, Limba, Akala, and Tahel near the huts.

They head to the spot where they left the robot under the oak. Tanned hides wrap the damaged android, placed on a litter of branches.

— We're returning to the ruins, Ruk says, his voice deep but calm. With this robot, for Korg and Zarion. They'll repair it, and we'll follow their light.

Aheya, leading the way, guides the clan through the forest. Her sharp senses watch for danger, her narrowed eyes scanning the trees' shadows.

— Look, she murmurs, her voice low but determined, pointing to the robot's eyes. Their light's returning, like a sign.

Enmen, carrying one end of the litter, nods, his eyes bright but tired.

— Yeah, he says, his voice vibrant but drained. This robot might lead us to their stars. But it's heavy. Let's hurry before the Wolves return!

They cross the plain, their steps crunching on dry grass, spears raised, hearts beating as one. Tatiba, holding a braided rope, watches the damaged robot, her fingers toying with a sharp stone.

— Look at its eyes, she murmurs, curious but cautious. They flicker faintly, like it's alive but wounded.

Limba, walking near Ruk, trembles slightly, his face pale but calmer, his spear lowered.

— A wounded robot, he murmurs, his voice hesitant but curious. What if it's cursed, like the other machines? But... if Korg and Zarion save it, I trust their wisdom.

Akala, the dreamer, pauses briefly, her gaze lost in the ruins looming in the distance, as if seeing beyond the broken stones.

— Yes, she says, her voice calm and soft. I feel... a promise, like a flowing river. This robot will speak, guide us, with Korg, with Zarion.

Tahel, chuckling softly but weary, carries the other end of the litter, his smile tight but determined.

— To the ruins, then! he says, his tone light but tense. If this robot tells a story, I'm listening.

The clan reaches the ruins by mid-morning, their eyes lighting up at the sight of the open hall, glowing screens, and moving metal robots. Korg addresses the clan, his voice clear and powerful.

— Shadow Clan, you've returned, he says, with this robot. We'll repair it. Zarion, prepare.

Zarion steps forward with the three repaired robots, their delicate pincers ready.

— Welcome, he says, his mechanical yet soothing voice resonating. Place the robot here. We'll revive it, as we did the others.

The clan sets the litter in the hall's center. Hides and branches are pulled back, revealing the damaged robot—twisted limbs, blackened circuits, its red eyes still faintly blinking.

Ruk, his face tense but confident, nods.

— Fix it, he says, his voice deep but firm. We want to hear its story and follow your light.

Zarion, his delicate pincers handling faulty circuits with precision, removes blackened, melted parts, replacing cables and crystals with intact pieces from the ruins. The repaired robots assist, their movements fluid and synchronized.

Korg, stationary but active, guides from his screens, projecting images of ancient repairs. There, he murmurs, connect the glowing plugs, avoid the invisible fire, like with me.

A powerful hum fills the hall, and the damaged robot's red eyes glow brighter, its limbs twitching slightly. With a metallic creak, it rises, joints crackling as its pincers open and close.

— I am Vynar, it says, its mechanical but clear voice resonating with newfound warmth. Awakened by your hands, Shadow Clan, and thanks to Korg and Zarion.

The clan flinches. Aheya, fists clenched, steps closer, her breath short but curious, eyes fixed on Vynar.

— Vynar? she murmurs, her voice tinged with fear but fascinated. You speak… like Zarion. What are you doing here? What's your story?

Vynar turns to Aheya, its pincers stilling, as if recognizing her.

— Shadow Clan, it says, its mechanical but warm voice lingering on Aheya with palpable curiosity. I'm a servant of the wise men, like Zarion. I carried, repaired, explored, until the cataclysm. Let me tell you.

The clan listens, frozen. Vynar continues, its voice an echoing metallic hum.

— We robots were the eyes and hands of men. But the cataclysm struck. Men screamed, fled, but many perished. Their machines and dreams were consumed by their war. A massive explosion and invisible fire burned my circuits, twisted my limbs. I dragged myself to the forest, systems failing, barely moving. I collapsed where you found me, waiting for help I thought was lost.

Aheya, captivated but moved, steps closer, her breath steady, eyes gleaming with new light.

— Waiting? she murmurs, her voice soft but curious. You waited all this time, in the dark, for us? Why do you cling to me, Vynar?

Vynar, its red eyes fixed on Aheya, responds, its mechanical voice tender.

— I sense… a promise in you, Aheya. Your fire, your caution, your gaze remind me of the wise men. I cling to you, as I did to them, to guide, to protect. My story is theirs, and now yours.

Ruk, his face tense but confident, nods, his gaze shifting from Vynar to Aheya.

— Your story binds us, he says, his voice deep but calm. But tell us of the lost technologies—those drones, cell phones, archives. What did they do for men?

Vynar, its pincers moving slowly, recounts, its voice vibrant with detail.

— Those drones flew, carried, watched. Those cell phones spoke, saw afar, stored memories—videos, images. Boxes in men's hands, linking their voices, their dreams. Those electronic archives held their history, maps, sciences. Gleaming disks, etched with signs, lost in the cataclysm but preserved here. With them, men touched the infinite, until the invisible fire betrayed them.

Korg's screens flood the vast hall with light, his circuits fully revived, his clear, powerful voice echoing after Vynar's words on the wise men's lost technologies. The Shadow Clan, frozen, slowly lowers its spears and staffs, a growing curiosity drawing them toward Korg, Zarion, Vynar, and the three repaired robots.

Korg projects images of the cataclysm, addressing the clan and robots, his voice sharp and commanding.

— Shadow Clan, Zarion, Vynar, robots, he says, I've recovered my memory—all the wise men's memories, buried in my circuits. Let me tell you the story of the great cataclysm, so you understand why we're here and where we must go.

Ruk, his face tense but confident, steps forward, spear lowered, eyes fixed on the screens.

— Tell us, Korg, he says, his voice deep but curious. We want to know why their towers fell, why their stars went dark.

Aheya, fists clenched, steps closer, her breath short but captivated, her narrowed eyes scanning the images.

— The cataclysm, she murmurs, her voice tinged with fear but eager. Was it a curse, like the elders said? Or a mistake of men?

Korg's screens zoom in on scenes of chaos—massive explosions leveling cities, firestorms sweeping plains, quakes splitting the earth.

— The cataclysm was a war, Korg says, a war of men against themselves, fueled by their machines, greed, and fear. They built towers to touch the stars, drones to fly, phones to speak, archives to remember, but also weapons—invisible fires that consumed everything. Skies turned black, oceans swallowed islands and continents. Men panicked—some fled to the stars, others hid underground, but many perished. Their machines, like me and the robots, overheated, collapsed. Zarion disconnected, Vynar was broken, and I was consumed by the invisible fire.

Enmen, his eyes bright with excitement but troubled, steps forward, his staff raised but lowered.

— To the stars? he asks, his voice vibrant with hope. Some men fled—where?

Korg hesitates, a faint hum filling the air, then his voice returns, patient and clear.

— Yes, Enmen , he says. Some fled to the stars, to other worlds, transformed by their machines. They became dreamers, keepers of

lost knowledge, men of brilliant light. But others stayed, broken like us, like you, the Shadows, their descendants.

Tatiba, holding a crystal fragment, nods, curious but cautious, her fingers toying with a dry leaf.

— Transformed? she murmurs, her voice soft but insistent. How? Did their machines change them, like they're changing us now, with you, Zarion, and Vynar?

Korg's screens project images of men merging with robots or drones, then he responds, his voice rich with detail.

Yes, Tatiba. Some used machines to evolve—their bodies lighter, minds vaster, linked to the stars. But it was their downfall too, for their transformations distanced them from the earth, their fire. The cataclysm scattered them, but their light persists, somewhere, in the future.

Limba, still backing away, shakes his head, his face pale but fascinated, his spear lowered.

— A future? he murmurs, his voice trembling but curious. But if their machines betrayed them, why trust you, Korg? Why don't you, Zarion, Vynar, destroy us, like their weapons?

Korg's abrupt laugh startles the clan, used to his solemnity. He responds, his voice patient but firm.

— We're not their weapons, Limba. We're their guardians, broken but repaired by you. The cataclysm was their mistake, not ours. I hold their knowledge, their light, to guide you, not harm you. Zarion, Vynar, all robots—we serve, as we did before.

Akala, the dreamer, steps forward, her gaze lost in the projected images, as if seeing beyond the glow.

— No, she says, her voice calm but firm. I feel… a promise, like a whispering river. Korg, Zarion, Vynar, you're our echoes, our guides. But tell us: where are the men of brilliant light? How do we find them?

Korg's screens zoom to a shifting map—plains, mountains, a distant glow in the west. He responds, his voice clear and vibrant.

— Those who stayed are out there, Akala, likely hidden in mountains or underground. I see their traces—circles, fires, a lost harmony. I can find them if they're still tied to a network.

Ruk, his face tense but confident, steps forward, spear lowered, eyes fixed on the screens.

— Tell us, Korg, he says, what are the stars? How did men reach them?

Aheya, fists clenched, steps closer, her breath short but captivated, her narrowed eyes scanning the images.

— The stars? she murmurs, her voice tinged with fear but eager. We see those bright points in the night sky! But men up there? That's impossible, like flying beyond the clouds.

Korg's screens zoom to scenes of light—twinkling points in a black sky, gleaming ships crossing the void.

— The stars, Shadow Clan, are distant suns, burning in the sky, like our Sun, but so far they shine like pearls in the night. The wise men reached them. They built machines, ships, to fly above them,

beyond our earth. They saw stars as dreams, promises, worlds to explore.

Enmen, his eyes bright with excitement but troubled, steps forward, his staff raised but lowered.

— Fly among the stars? he asks, his voice vibrant with hope. How? With their drones, their phones? Were they that powerful to reach those lights?

Korg hesitates, a faint hum filling the air, then his voice returns, patient and clear, his screens showing egg-shaped ships launching into the void, men in gleaming suits walking on a red, dusty surface.

— No, Enmen, not drones or phones. The wise men were dreamers, builders. They crafted ships to cross the sky, powered by fire and cosmic winds. One of their first stars was Mars : a red, dry, cold planet they made alive. Before the cataclysm, they built domes, underground farms, cities under artificial skies where air breathed like here. Mars became their second home, a refuge among the stars, housing thousands of men, robots like Zarion and Vynar, drones for digging, phones for communicating.

Tatiba, holding a crystal fragment, nods, curious but cautious, her fingers toying with a dry leaf.

— Mars? she murmurs, her voice soft but insistent. A red, living land? How did they live there, far from our Sun? Were they happy?

Korg's screens show gleaming domes under a starry sky, men tending red fields. He responds, his voice vibrant with detail and poetry.

— Yes, Tatiba. Mars was their dream : a red, dusty world, transformed by their fire, their knowledge. They lived under clear domes, farming with water drawn from the ground, breathing air they created. They were happy exploring, building, touching the stars. But they were also alone, far from Earth, waiting for news via phones, satellites, TVs.

Limba, still backing away, shakes his head, his face pale but fascinated, his spear lowered.

— Waiting? he murmurs, his voice trembling but curious. Why did they leave? Why did Earth drive them away, if Mars was so far?

Korg laughs again, then responds, his voice patient but heavy.

— They didn't flee entirely, Limba. They left to explore, to dream, but also from fear. The cataclysm forced them from Mars too. When Earth's skies blackened, firestorms swept plains, quakes broke the land, some men fled to Mars in gleaming ships, hoping for refuge. But contact broke : phones went silent, drones fell, archives were lost in chaos. Mars grew quiet, isolated, its domes shattered by cold, its men scattered or transformed, waiting for a return that never came.

Akala, the dreamer, steps forward, her gaze lost in the projected images, as if seeing beyond the glow.

— No, she says, her voice calm but awestruck. I feel… a promise, like a whispering river. Mars, the stars… it's a dream, Korg.

Korg responds, his voice clear and vibrant, tinged with hope.

— Yes, Akala. Perhaps some still shine on Mars or elsewhere among the stars, or hide in our future. I see their traces, a lost harmony.

8

The Tools of the Wise Men.

Ruk, his face tense but confident, steps forward, his spear lowered, his gaze fixed on the glowing screens.

— Those domes, Mars, the stars… he murmurs, his voice deep but awestruck. It's a dream! Mars is too far for the clan. Man has fallen since those glorious days. We must stay here, rebuild, and live in harmony with nature!

Zarion, his metallic limbs gleaming, steps forward. His red eyes flicker softly, his mechanical but soothing voice echoing in the hall, his words clear and measured.

— Shadow Clan, he says, we will guide you. The drones in these ruins can fly… their silent wings, their thrusters powered by the invisible fire. The cell phones, maps, archives will teach you their knowledge. But you must touch them, dare to try!

Vynar, his delicate pincers moving slowly, turns to Aheya.

— Aheya, he says, I sense your fire, your caution. With me, with Zarion, we'll rebuild their dreams, but you must move forward, explore, even if you fear the invisible fire.

Aheya, fists clenched, nods, her breath short but resolute, her narrowed eyes scanning the images.

— The Wise Men, she murmurs, her voice tinged with fear but determined. They were brilliant, wise, but where are their

descendants, Korg? Where are the Men of the Future? We must find them, so they can lead us, teach us.

Korg intervenes, his voice clear and thoughtful. His screens zoom in on a shifting map: plains, rivers, mountains to the west, a distant glow marking a circle.

— You're right, Ruk, Aheya. Mars is a distant dream, beyond your current strength. The Men of the Future, descendants of the Wise Men, stayed on Earth. I see their traces in my archives, to the west, in broken mountains. They hide, their fires burning faintly, waiting to be awakened.

Enmen, his eyes bright with excitement but troubled, steps forward, his staff raised but lowered.

— The Men of the Future! he exclaims, his voice vibrant with hope. If they're west, we can march, but where, Korg? These lands are vast, broken, dangerous. How do we find them?

Zarion steps forward, his mechanical voice resonating alongside Korg's.

— Enmen, he says, Korg's archives show a circle to the west: a place where the Wise Men left fires, signs. But the path is long, perilous : burned plains, poisoned rivers, savage clans like the Wolves.

Tatiba, holding a crystal fragment, nods, curious but cautious, her fingers toying with a dry leaf.

— Guide us, she murmurs, her voice soft but insistent. Your drones, Korg, can they show us? But the roads are dangerous: Wolves, beasts, ruins. How do we face them?

Korg, his screens projecting images of scorched plains, dark rivers, and broken machines, responds, his voice thoughtful but resolute.

— Tatiba, the drones will scout ahead, my archives hold maps we'll read for you. The dangers are real: burned plains, poisoned rivers, savage clans, mutated beasts, cursed machines. We'll arm your spears, your ropes, and I'll teach you to avoid the invisible fire with my robots. The archives also show forgotten threats: toxic winds, cracked lands, unknown beasts. Are you ready to dare?

Limba, still backing away, shakes his head, his face pale but fascinated, his spear lowered.

— Danger? he murmurs, his voice trembling but curious. The cataclysm broke everything. What if the Men of the Future are cursed, like their machines, Korg?

Korg, a digital smile flickering on his screens, responds, his voice reassuring but logical.

— Limba, I understand your fear: the cataclysm was a betrayal by their machines, not their spirit. The Men of the Future, I know from my memories, hold knowledge. They're not cursed; they're waiting. We'll go slowly, testing each step, and the robots will guard your flanks.

The three repaired robots step forward behind Zarion and Vynar, their mechanical voices resonating together, deep and soothing.

— We serve, they say, their words synchronized. The drones, the phones, they're your tools, your guides. But the path will be hard.

Akala, the dreamer, steps forward, her gaze lost in the projected images, as if seeing beyond the glow.

— No, she says, her voice calm but firm. I feel… a promise, like a whispering river. The Men of the Future, descendants of the Wise Men, are here, on Earth, hidden. Their fires still burn. Korg, where do we start? What do you say, you who reason?

— Akala, your instinct is true. We start west, where my archives mark a circle. But I reason: the path will be harsh, with toxic winds, cracked lands, unknown beasts. Tomorrow, we set out. The drones will scout, the robots will prepare the tools.

Tahel, chuckling softly but determined, raises his staff, his smile sharp but thoughtful.

— Tomorrow, then! he says, his tone light but resolute. If their lights shine west, I'm ready, Korg. But tell us: how do we face the dangers? How do your drones save us?

Korg, his screens showing egg-shaped drones with thin wings soaring over plains, responds, his voice patient but firm.

— Tahel, the drones will fly, and you'll ride them. They'll spot dangers: toxic winds, poisoned rivers, mutated beasts. If a savage clan attacks during a stop, my robots will fight with you. The drones are shielded by an invisible force net. Tonight, you'll train with a drone; I'll teach you to read its signals. For the flight itself, you'll do nothing because I control the drones from here. I'll be with you constantly throughout the journey.

Ruk, his face tense but confident, nods. His gaze shifts from the screens to the clan's awestruck faces, then to the robots.

— We dare, he declares, his voice deep but resolute. We'll go west, toward the Men of the Future, descendants of the Wise Men. Korg, robots, show us and let's start tonight.

Korg's screens project images of sturdy belts and metal helmets adorned with crystals.

— Shadow Clan, he says, you won't need to master the drones : that's my role, with my oversight and maps. Tonight, learn to wear these belts to secure yourselves to the drones, these helmets to protect you and hear me.

Aheya, fists clenched, steps closer, her breath short but curious, her narrowed eyes fixed on the helmets.

— Secure them? she murmurs, her voice tinged with fear and curiosity. How, Korg? These belts, these helmets... we've never traveled like this. What if they fall, or choke us?

Korg responds, his voice patient but firm.

— Aheya, I understand your fear. The belts fasten with simple buckles: you slide the straps, pull tight, like your hides. The helmets shield your head from toxic winds and hold crystals so I can speak to you, like a voice in the air. The belt's like a rope tied around your waist, the helmet's like a cap against the cold, but you can hear someone far away who isn't there. Try now!

Zarion steps forward with a helmet and belt.

— Ruk, he says, his words clear and measured, the belt ties like this, the helmet fits over your head. The helmet's light—put it on, and you'll hear Korg.

The three repaired robots step forward, each holding a belt and helmet.

— One robot per drone, they say. We control, repair. Korg directs. You wear the helmets, fasten the belts. Prepare for tomorrow.

Enmen, his eyes bright with excitement but troubled, takes a belt, his fingers hesitant on the buckles.

— Wear them? he asks, his voice vibrant with hope. But how do we know the helmets work?

Korg responds, his voice patient but resolute.

— Enmen, you'll learn now. Put on the belt, adjust the helmet, and you'll hear my voice. I'm testing now.

A faint crackle fills the air, and Korg's voice resonates in the helmet Enmen wears, clear and close.

— Can you hear me? This is my strength : I read the maps, see the terrain, and speak to all. But you can also talk to each other or contact me.

Tatiba, holding a helmet, nods, curious but cautious.

— And if the winds hit us, or a drone fails? Will the robots be enough, Korg?

— Tatiba, the helmets filter toxic winds, the belts hold you. If a drone falters, the robots will handle it.

Limba, still backing away, takes a belt, his face pale but fascinated.

— Set out? he murmurs, his voice trembling but curious. If the helmets work, if Korg sees, I'll follow. But the dangers… how do they protect us?

Korg responds, his voice encouraging.

— Limba, the drones spot dangers: winds, poisoned rivers, mutated beasts. The helmets warn you, the belts secure you. The robots will fight alongside you.

Ruk, his face tense but confident, nods, adjusting his belt with Zarion's help.

— We dare, he declares, his voice deep but resolute. Korg, robots, show us ! Let's start tonight.

Korg's screens project ancient images: workers assembling robots in bright workshops, machines tending fields, robots piloting cars and planes. Korg's voice resonates in the clan's helmets.

— Listen to the story of the robots. They were forged by the Wise Men centuries ago, in workshops where the invisible fire glowed, where human hands and machines worked as one. Zarion, Vynar, their kind, were built to serve : plowing fields, carrying loads, building towers, exploring unknown lands.

I, Korg, was their mind, an Artificial Intelligence to guide, to reason, while they were my eyes, hands, and feet. The cataclysm broke them : their circuits melted, their bodies collapsed in firestorms and cracked lands. But some, like Zarion, disconnected in alcoves, sleeping in the dark; Vynar faded in a forest, his red eyes

flickering faintly, waiting for rescue. They survived to keep their promise: to aid the Wise Men or their descendants, the Men of the Future. You revived them, Shadow Clan, and now they serve you, as they serve me, to rekindle the lost light.

Korg, projecting images of desolate plains, dark rivers, and deformed beasts, continues, his voice clear but grave, detailing the dangers awaiting them west.

— Shadow Clan, robots, he says, the path to the Men of the Future will be a trial: my maps show burned plains, where the ground is black, cracked, radiating heat that sears feet, where flying ash stings eyes and throats; poisoned rivers, their oily, black waters reeking with a sharp odor that chokes lungs, where a single touch can burn skin; toxic winds, howling, carrying green vapors that scorch flesh and cloud minds, blinding the march. Savage clans, like the Wolves, prowl, their faces painted with red mud, armed with bone spears and stone-studded clubs. They attack without words, driven by hunger and fear. Mutated beasts, born of the ruins, emerge: two-headed wolves, their fangs dripping venom; birds with metal wings, their cries piercing helmets; giant snakes with gleaming scales, slithering in shadows. Finally, broken machines, abandoned by the cataclysm, sometimes stir: drones with rusted blades, robots with crazed circuits, their eyes flashing with rage, striking without reason. The drones will scout, the robots will fight, but you must stay vigilant, your spears ready, your helmets secure.

9

Sandstorm.

The sun barely rises, bathing the ruins in golden light, when Korg's clear, vibrant voice resonates in the Shadow Clan's helmets from the distant ruins.

— Shadow Clan, he says, his words projected through the drones' dials, displaying a shifting map westward, the time has come. The drones are ready, the robots in control. Fasten your belts, adjust your helmets. I guide you from here, reading maps, seeing the terrain. Let's fly to the Men of the Future, in the broken mountains.

The Shadow Clan, belts tightly fastened, helmets crackling with Korg's voice, sit inside egg-shaped drones, their thin wings humming softly. Ruk, his face tense but determined, takes the front, his spear resting beside him.

— We dare, he murmurs, his voice deep and serious.

The drones rise, lifted by the invisible fire, and the ruins' ground recedes, revealing a landscape of desolate plains under a pale sky. But as the drones climb, a wave of apprehension sweeps the clan. Their hearts pound harder, their fingers grip the belts tightly.

Limba, wide-eyed, peers through a transparent opening, his face pale, his breath rapid in his helmet.

— The ground... he murmurs, his voice trembling, it's fading, falling away! We're too high, what if we crash? Korg, do you hear?

Korg's voice, projected from the ruins through the dials, responds, calm but firm.

— Limba, I see. You're secure. The drones fly, the robots monitor. Breathe, look : the earth opens, but you won't fall.

Aheya, fists clenched against her belt, stares at the receding ground, the ruins shrinking to a speck, the trees blurring into patches.

— It's… strange, she breathes, her voice mixing fear and fascination. The earth slips away, like a spirit fading. And the horizon… it grows, stretches, too vast, too far!

Her eyes scan the pale sky, where desolate plains stretch endlessly, the horizon retreating like an infinite sea, sending a shiver down her spine.

Enmen, gripping his spear, leans slightly, his eyes bright but troubled, watching the horizon widen further, the broken mountains appearing as jagged shadows in the distance.

— Everything… it's so vast, he murmurs, his voice vibrant with worry but awestruck. We fly like birds, but… so far from the ground, how do we hunt? How do we touch the earth? Zarion, Vynar, is this normal?

Zarion, his red eyes flickering softly, monitors the drone's dials. His mechanical but soothing voice echoes in the helmets.

— Enmen, he says, with measured words, flying is a gift of the Wise Men. The ground remains, but you'll see it from above. Korg guides, we hold. Your fear is normal, you weren't born to fly, but you'll learn.

Vynar, his delicate pincers adjusting a dial near Aheya, turns to her, his voice warm but firm.

— Aheya, he says, the horizon widens, but it shows the path. The mountains, out there, hide the Men of the Future. Korg sees all, I protect. Hold fast, your fire will carry you.

Akala, the dreamer, gazes at the retreating horizon, her eyes lost in the vastness, a trembling smile on her lips.

— No, she murmurs, her voice calm but moved, I feel… a promise, like a river opening. The ground fades, but the sky calls us. Ruk, do you see? We're free, even if it's frightening.

Tahel, laughing nervously to mask his unease, adjusts his helmet.

— Free, maybe! he says, his tone light but tense. But so high… if a wind pushes us, or a drone fails? Korg, robots, what then?

Korg's voice intervenes, reassuring but resolute.

— Tahel, I see everything from the ruins. The maps track the winds, the drones hold. If a drone falters, the robots, Zarion, Vynar, the others, will handle it. Look to the horizon, Shadow Clan: it leads to the Men of the Future. I guide, you fly. Dare, as your ancestors dared the hunt.

Ruk, his face still tense but calmed by Korg's voice, nods, his eyes scanning the stretching horizon, the desolate plains becoming an endless tapestry.

— We dare, he repeats, his voice deep but steadier. The ground fades, but our quest nears. Korg, robots, lead us.

But at noon, a sandstorm surge like a roaring, brown wall obscuring the sky. Korg's voice, tense but firm, resonates from the dials.

— Shadow Clan, robots: a storm approaches, too strong to fly. I detect a landing site east, but caution : my maps show a radioactive zone, infested. Stay in the drones, shielded by force fields, until I find a safe route.

The drones descend with a rumble, landing on gray, cracked ground where the air shimmers with an unhealthy glow. Force fields, activated remotely by Korg, envelop the drones, repelling sand and winds. Inside, the clan adjusts their helmets, faces blending fear and fascination, as gleaming-scaled serpents and ferocious beasts emerge from the terrain, their silhouettes stark against the storm.

Night falls. Beyond the force fields, the clan watches, apprehensive. Giant serpents, their scaly bodies glowing with radioactive green, slither cunningly, their forked tongues hissing like blades in the wind, seeking invisible prey. Ferocious beasts, like prehistoric wolves with sharp fangs and massive claws, roar. Their guttural cries echo like war drums. They clash in deadly struggles over a glowing bone, rolling in the dust with unspeakable savagery. Birds with spiny wings beat the air fiercely, their shrill screeches piercing the darkness.

Enmen, wide-eyed, murmurs into his helmet, his voice vibrant with awe.

— Look at these beasts! he says, his tone mixing fear and admiration. Like spirits of the cataclysm: their cries, their battles... are they cursed or alive? Korg, what do you see?

Korg's voice responds, calm but curious.

— Enmen, I see all from the ruins. These beasts are alive, transformed by the earth's poison. Their cunning, their struggles, are magnificent but dangerous. Stay under the fields, I'm watching.

Aheya, clutching her spear, nods, her breath short, captivated.

— Alive, she replies, her voice trembling but curious. That serpent feinted, then struck. And those wolves… they fight like our ancestors, but stronger. Ruk, what do you think? Robots, what do you say?

Ruk, his gaze fixed on a clash between two beasts, responds, his voice deep but thoughtful.

— They survive, like us. But this terrain… it glows, it smells of death. Zarion, Vynar, what's happening here?

Zarion, his red eyes flickering through the force field, steps closer. His mechanical but clear voice resonates in the helmets.

— Ruk, Aheya, he says, with measured words, this terrain is radioactive, an invisible poison from the cataclysm, a fire that consumes flesh, clouds minds, kills slowly. The Wise Men used it in their machines, but it escaped, tainting the earth. These beasts mutated : their scales, their claws, born of this poison.

Vynar, his delicate pincers adjusting a drone near the force field, adds, his voice warm but firm.

— The serpents, the wolves: their cunning, their strength, come from radioactivity. It changes them, makes them fiercer, but fragile. The field protects you so don't step out, or the poison will take you. Korg, confirm.

Korg's voice intervenes, solemn but reassuring.

— Vynar is right. Radioactivity is a legacy of the Wise Men, a fire they lost. It glows in the air, in the ground. One step outside, and your bodies would weaken, your minds fade. Watch these beasts : their struggles are a wild echo, born of this poison, but we'll survive. Stay in the drones, under the fields. At dawn, my drones will find a safe route.

Akala, the dreamer, watches a serpent coil around a rock, her gaze lost in the green glow.

— Magnificent, she murmurs, her voice calm but moved. Like living shadows... but dangerous. Tahel, what do you think of their strength?

Tahel, chuckling softly despite the tension, adjusts his helmet, his smile sharp but cautious.

— Strength, sure! He says, his tone light but serious. Those wolves fight like lions, but I'd take our spears any day. Korg, robots, how long is this night?

Korg's voice, projected from the ruins through the dials, responds, resolute.

— Tahel, dawn is near, a few hours. Watch, learn, but stay cautious. The drones monitor from here, the robots guard with you. Tomorrow, we fly, far from this poison!

10

The Crystal Cube.

The next morning, the sandstorm subsides, leaving a pale sky and dust-laden air. Korg's clear, vibrant voice resonates in the Shadow Clan's helmets from the main ruins.

— Shadow Clan, robots, he says, his words projected through the drones' dials, the storm has calmed and my maps show a clear path west. The drones take off, stay fastened, I guide.

The drones rise gently, and the clan, still shaken by the night in the radioactive terrain, watches the desolate plains with apprehension mixed with hope.

En route, as the drones soar over a cracked plain, imposing ruins loom on the horizon: broken towers with metallic glints, gutted domes draped in dead vines, their outlines shimmering under the pale sun.

Enmen, wide-eyed, leans toward a transparent opening, his voice vibrant with awe in his helmet.

— Look! he exclaims, his tone blending curiosity and excitement. These ruins... they shine! Ruk, should we explore?

Korg's voice intervenes, firm but cautious

— Shadow Clan, he says, his voice echoing in the helmets, my maps show these ancient ruins, but they're dangerous. Broken machines, invisible traps may lurk. I warn you: exploring is risky. Continue west, toward the Men of the Future.

But Ruk, his face tense but determined, shakes his head, his voice deep and resolute.

— Korg, these ruins might hold clues, archives, signs of the Wise Men. We must know. Land the drones, we'll investigate.

The drones land with a low rumble near the ruins, on cracked ground where rusted metal fragments faintly gleam. The clan dismounts, spears ready, helmets crackling with Korg's instructions.

— I decide, Korg declares through the dials, his voice tinged with reluctance, one robot stays on guard, monitoring the drones and warning of danger. It will activate force fields if needed. Be cautious, I see from the ruins, but my eyes are limited here.

The clan, joined by Zarion and Vynar, enters the ruins, their steps crunching on debris, the air heavy with the scent of rust and metal.

They discover a vast hall with blackened walls covered in faded frescoes: silhouettes of Wise Men operating machines, drones soaring in a starry sky, glowing circles like maps. At the center, a stone altar supports a metallic cube, etched with strange symbols, emitting a pulsing blue glow.

Aheya, fists clenched, approaches, her voice trembling but curious.

— A stone... she murmurs, it glows, like the stars Korg spoke of. Is it a treasure?

Zarion, his red eyes scanning the cube, steps forward. His mechanical voice is cautious.

— Aheya, he says, this crystal cube is an archive, a relic of the Wise Men, sealed by their invisible fire. But caution : it may be trapped or cursed by the cataclysm.

Vynar, his delicate pincers brushing the engravings, adds, his voice warm but uneasy.

— Yes, Aheya, I sense heat, danger. Korg, do you see? What do we do?

Korg's voice, projected from the main ruins through the dials, intervenes, thoughtful but tense.

— I see, Vynar. My scans show unstable energy in this cube. It's an archive, yes, but guarded by invisible fire. A discharge could burn or awaken broken machines in these ruins. Don't touch it yet. Explore around, seek clues, but be ready to flee.

Ruk, spear raised, nods, his gaze scanning the frescoes and shadows.

— We search, he murmurs, his voice deep. But this cube… it calls, like a fire. Akala, what do you feel?

Akala, the dreamer, brushes a fresco, her gaze lost in the silhouettes.

— A promise, she murmurs, her voice calm but moved. These Wise Men… they dreamed of stars, of circles, but this cube… it's alive, dangerous.

Tahel, chuckling softly despite the tension, adjusts his helmet, his spear ready.

— Alive? he says, his tone light but nervous. Then let it sleep! Zarion, Vynar, what do these walls show? Is there more here?

Zarion, his red eyes scanning the frescoes, responds:

— Tahel, these walls speak: maps, routes west, to the Men of the Future. But also warnings: broken machines sleep here, ready to wake. Stay vigilant.

Vynar, his pincers pointing to a crack in a wall, adds:

— Yes, and there, crystals, like those in our helmets. They glow faintly, perhaps more knowledge.

But as Vynar nears the crystals, the cube at the hall's center emits a deep hum, its blue glow intensifying sharply. Korg's voice, projected from the main ruins through the helmets, rings out, tense but authoritative.

Shadow Clan, robots, stop! This cube… my scans show a digital archive of the Wise Men, but also a sealed teleportation gate. Activating it could open a passage to the Men of the Future or a trap. Don't touch it, back away!

Too late! Aheya, mesmerized, reaches for the cube, her fingers grazing an engraving. A blue energy surge erupts, lighting the hall, and metallic clanks echo from the shadows. Machines stir somewhere in the ruins' darkness. Zarion steps before the clan, his mechanical voice urgent.

— Aheya, back off! This cube is an archive and a gate, but it's waking the machines! Korg, what do we do?

Korg's voice, projected through the helmets, rises, thoughtful but urgent.

— I see! This cube holds the Wise Men's memories, their maps, their dreams, but also a sealed gate to a refuge, perhaps the western mountains. Its activation broke the seal! These machines are guardians, corrupted by the cataclysm. Robots, protect the clan! I'm seeking a solution from the ruins. Await my orders!

The broken machines advance, their creaking blades aimed at the clan. Vynar, pincers extended, intercepts a dog-like robot with a metallic clash, while the three other robots form a defensive circle.

— We fight, Vynar says, his voice firm. The cube is alive: an archive, a gate. Korg, guide us!

The clan, spears ready, retreats to the wall, hearts pounding.

Akala, her gaze fixed on the cube pulsing like a heart, murmurs, her voice trembling but resolute.

— A gate… it calls, like a river. But these machines… they hate us. Ruk, what do we do?

Ruk, spear raised, eyes the approaching machines.

— We resist, but if it's a gate, it leads to the Men of the Future. Korg, can you open it safely?

Korg's voice, projected from the ruins, hesitates, then decides.

— Ruk, I reason. I can try stabilizing the cube from here, via the crystals. But the risk is great : if I fail, the energy could destroy the

ruins or trap you in the void. Robots, hold the machines; clan, retreat to the crystals. I'm starting... now!

A tense silence fills the hall, broken by the cube's growing hum. The wall's crystals glow, and a blue wave spreads, calming the broken machines, which freeze.

Korg's voice, relieved but cautious, resonates again.

— It's working, the cube is stabilized, the gate activated but fragile. It may lead to the Men of the Future, but one step inside, and you could be lost. Decide, clan: explore or flee?

Ruk, spear raised, stares at the gate's blue glow, his face tense and hesitant.

— A gate to the Men of the Future... he murmurs. But the risk is great. Korg, what do you say? Can we be sure?

Korg's voice resonates, thoughtful and resolute.

— Ruk, I reason: sending a human is too dangerous. Better to send a robot. Vynar, approach. You'll explore, and we'll see.

Vynar, his delicate pincers gleaming under the blue glow, steps toward the cube. His red eyes flicker softly.

— I'm going, he says, his metallic voice steady.

He places a pincer on the cube, and a blinding light engulfs him before the clan's awestruck eyes. His metallic form dematerializes in a silent flash, then vanishes, leaving only void.

Instantly, Vynar reappears elsewhere. His flickering form materializes in a dark, cracked-walled chamber, where a second gate stands. But its engravings are dull, refusing to glow. He touches the inert gate, but nothing happens. He decides to contact his companions, left in doubt of the operation's success. His voice, projected through his own system, echoes in the helmets.

— Korg, clan, I've arrived in a chamber, but I'm stuck. Another gate refuses to activate. The path is broken, I can't go further.

Vynar dematerializes again, returning to the initial hall in a blue flash.

The clan, frozen, watches Vynar reappear, his red eyes flickering faintly, his mechanical voice tinged with regret.

— Aheya, Ruk, he says, the passage is cut. I saw a chamber, a sealed gate, perhaps to a Wise Men's refuge, but it doesn't respond. The cube brought me back, but the path is dead.

Aheya, fists clenched, murmurs, her voice trembling but curious.

— Dead? So this gate… it deceives us?

Korg's voice, projected from the ruins, rises, grave but logical.

— No, Aheya, it doesn't deceive, it's broken. My scans confirm: this cube is an archive and a gate designed by the Wise Men to link their refuges. Vynar reached an intermediate point, but the second gate, inert, shows the cataclysm severed the link: perhaps a destroyed refuge or an irreparable seal. The cube remains active but useless for advancing. Explore the ruins differently, seek clues.

Enmen, his eyes bright but troubled, approaches the frescoes, his spear hesitant.

— A broken gate... he murmurs, his voice vibrant with hope mixed with disappointment. But these walls, they still speak. Akala, do you see anything else?

Akala, the dreamer, brushes a fresco, her gaze lost in the silhouettes.

— Yes, she says, her voice moved. These circles... routes, places. Perhaps another path to the Men of the Future, beyond this gate.

Zarion steps forward, scanning the frescoes with his flickering red eyes.

— Akala is right, he says. These images show routes, not through the gate but across the land, west. Korg, what do you see from the ruins?

Korg's voice responds, patient but cautious.

— Zarion, my maps confirm: a land route west, beyond these ruins. But dangers persist: machines, mutated beasts. The cube is a valuable archive I can read remotely to extract data. Robots, protect the clan, explore the frescoes, but stay near the entrance.

Tahel, chuckling softly to mask his tension, adjusts his helmet, his spear ready.

— An archive, a dead gate... he says, his tone light but nervous. So we walk? Ruk, what do you decide? Will these walls guide us?

Ruk, his gaze shifting from the frescoes to the silent cube, nods, his voice deep but resolute.

— We walk! The gate is broken, but these maps speak. Korg, robots, guide us, let's continue.

Korg's voice, projected from the main ruins through the helmets, rises, thoughtful but curious.

— Shadow Clan, robots, he says, this cube is not just an archive, it holds a planetary gateway, a passage designed by the Wise Men to link their refuges. But it's sealed by a code for protected humans with a specific map I don't detect here. I'll try to break the archive's code. Stay cautious!

A rising hum fills the hall, the wall's crystals pulsing in rhythm with the cube, its colors shifting through every hue. Then a sharp clank echoes, like a latch opening.

Korg's voice, tense but triumphant, resumes after a total silence.

— I've done it : the archive's code is broken! Prepare clan, a revelation awaits.

11

The Shadows.

A holographic light bursts from the cube, projecting the trembling silhouette of an elderly man with a light beard, dressed in a white tunic. He seems to gaze toward the clan. After a few seconds of heavy silence, his voice echoes in the hall like a whisper from the past.

— We survived the cataclysm in underground refuges, beyond the western mountains. Our light fades, we call to you: find us, rekindle our fire. This archive is our voice. Follow the maps, but beware the shadows.

Aheya, fists clenched, stares at the hologram, her eyes glistening with restrained tears.

— They live… she murmurs, her voice trembling but relieved. A call, after all this time! Ruk, is it real?

Ruk, his face tense but lit with hope, nods, his spear lowered.

— Real, he says, his voice deep. Korg, this man… he guides us. What does it mean?

Korg's voice responds, moved but analytical.

— Ruk, it's proof. The Men of the Future, descendants of the Wise Men, are alive, hidden beneath the mountains. But the planetary gateway remains locked without the map, we must walk, follow the frescoes. My scans show heightened dangers: the shadows are not machines, but extraterrestrials, infiltrating through a tear in space,

thriving in radioactivity. The archive names their artifacts: void spheres, small beads of shadow, destructive, emerging from the void.

Enmen, his eyes bright but troubled, approaches the frescoes, his spear hesitant.

— Void spheres… he murmurs, his voice vibrant with dread. The shadows send them? Akala, what do you see in these maps?

Akala, the dreamer, brushes a fresco, her gaze lost in the circles.

— Yes, she says, her voice calm but tense. These lines : tunnels, routes beneath the earth. But dark shapes move… the extraterrestrials, perhaps, with their spheres.

Zarion, his red eyes scanning the fading hologram, turns to the clan.

— Ruk, Akala, Enmen : the hologram confirms tunnels west. The shadows are extraterrestrials, and the void spheres their weapons: they attack in swarms, emerging from the void unpredictably, destroying everything in their path. The archive shows how to counter them. Korg, what do you see from the ruins?

Cautious but resolute, Korg responds.

— Zarion, the drones detect movement : extraterrestrials approach, their void spheres forming. The archive reveals weapons in a nearby chamber: light launchers, capable of annihilating the spheres. Robots, retrieve them, distribute them to the clan, quickly!

Vynar and Zarion rush to a crack in the wall, their pincers clearing a path to a small chamber where metallic cylinders adorned

with crystals gleam. They return, distributing the launchers to the clan.

— Take them, Zarion says. These are light launchers. Aim at the spheres, press here. But caution: don't aim at structures, robots, or yourselves because the light dissolves everything, including us.

Vynar adds:

— Hold firmly, adjust your grip. Your spears are useless against the spheres. Follow our movements, stay in line when they attack.

Suddenly, a shiver ripples through the air, and swarms of shadow beads, small as drops of night, emerge from the void, swirling in silent clusters. They surge toward the clan, piercing stone, erasing frescoes on contact. Ruk, his spear useless, grabs a launcher and forms a line with the clan. His deep voice commands:

— In line, like for the hunt! Korg, guide us!

Korg's voice rises, authoritative.

— Ruk, aim at the swarms, one shot is enough. Robots, protect the flanks. I'm watching from the ruins. Fire, now!

The launchers activate, casting white beams that pierce the swarms, dissolving the void spheres in silent bursts. But extraterrestrial silhouettes, gleaming with radioactivity, emerge from the shadows. They observe, their indistinct forms quivering in the darkness.

The shadows manifest brazenly before the robots and clan. Their fluid bodies, like veils of radioactive mist, take shape: slender beings with overly long limbs, black eyes glinting like bottomless wells. They

advance, unleashing new swarms of void spheres that surge toward the clan, piercing stone and erasing frescoes. But Zarion and Vynar counter, their light beams slicing through the swarms, while the clan, in line, mimics their aim with precision. Some shadows vanish under the shots, their forms dissolving into green wisps, while others, panicked, retreat, slipping through cracked walls, vanishing into the ruins' depths.

The clan, in line, ceases firing, their launchers still smoking in their hands. Ruk, his face tense but triumphant, lowers his weapon.

— They flee… he shouts, breathless but relieved. The shadows, we drove them back with the robots. Korg, do you see?

Korg's voice, projected from the ruins, resonates, satisfied but cautious.

— Yes, Ruk, I see. Your launchers, guided by the robots, defeated the spheres and forced the extraterrestrials to retreat. You've won a battle, Shadow Clan.

Aheya, fingers tight around her launcher, breathes deeply, her eyes shining with newfound resolve.

— A battle… she murmurs, her voice trembling but proud. Now we know that the Men of the Future live, trapped in their underground by the cataclysm. They survive, but their fire fades, their resources dwindle. We must save them.

Akala, the dreamer, nods, her gaze fixed on an intact fresco.

— Yes, she says, her voice calm but moved, we'll save them. We, the Shadows, men of the past, will rekindle their light.

Enmen, holding his launcher cautiously, watches the shadows vanish, his voice vibrant with awe.

— Their fire fades… he murmurs, but we still burn. What irony : they, so wise, saved by us, hunters of carved stone. Korg, robots, what now?

Zarion, his red eyes flickering softly, steps forward, his mechanical voice steady.

— Enmen, the frescoes show the way, tunnels beneath the mountains. But caution, the shadows may return.

Vynar, his pincers adjusting a launcher, adds, his voice warm but firm.

— Yes, keep the launchers. The void spheres are gone, but the extraterrestrials lurk. Korg, what do you see from the ruins?

Korg's voice responds, resolute but attentive.

— Vynar, my drones confirm: the shadows have retreated but still watch, hidden. The tunnels are your route as I'm reading the frescoes' maps. Prepare to march, Shadow Clan. You know where to go and who to save.

Tahel, chuckling softly to ease the tension, adjusts his helmet, his launcher ready.

— March, then! he says, his tone light but determined. We drove off the shadows and now we'll find the Men of the Future. Ruk, Akala, let's see these tunnels! Korg, guide us.

Ruk, his gaze shifting from the frescoes to the launchers in their hands, nods, his voice deep but resolute.

— Yes, we have a fire to rekindle. Korg, robots, lead us ! We're going.

But before marching, Ruk raises a hand, his face tense but wise.

— We drove off the shadows, he says, but they'll return. Let's rest, we must be strong for the Men of the Future.

Force fields activated, the clan settles near the drones, belts loosened, helmets within reach, forming a defensive circle. Zarion and Vynar patrol, their red eyes scanning the ruins' shadows, while Aheya, exhausted, sits against a wall, her launcher on her lap.

— The shadows... she murmurs, her voice weary but determined. We defeated them once, but for the Men of the Future, we must drive them out forever. Korg, is there a way?

Korg's voice rises, thoughtful but confident.

— Aheya, I'm reasoning! The archive describes the shadows, their tie to radioactivity and the space tear. The Wise Men lacked time to build a weapon against them before the cataclysm, but I can invent one: a cyclotron, a magnetic field generator to draw them in and send them back to their void. I'll devise a plan: robots, search for a sealed storage in these ruins, intact since the cataclysm.

Zarion and Vynar move off, their metallic steps echoing in the silence. They find a sealed door in an intact wing of the ruins. Inside, a preserved storage: metal parts, coils, crystals, untouched by destruction.

— Here, Zarion says, his mechanical voice clear, intact materials, ready for use. Korg, give us the plan.

Korg's voice guides them precisely.

— Zarion, Vynar, assemble a cylinder with these coils, attach the crystals here, connect the circuits there. This cyclotron will generate a magnetic field to draw the shadows by their radioactivity and open a vortex to their tear. Clan, form a guard around them : it's our invention, born of my calculations, to protect you and give you confidence.

The robots work swiftly, their agile pincers assembling the cyclotron under Korg's directives. A low hum fills the hall, waking Enmen, who approaches, his eyes bright but uneasy.

— A cyclotron... he murmurs, his voice vibrant. You created it, Korg? Will it send them back?

Korg's voice responds, confident.

— Yes, Enmen, it's my invention, designed for you. The Wise Men lacked this chance, overwhelmed before they could act. Akala, what do you feel?

Akala, the dreamer, gazes at the device, her voice calm but assured.

— It will succeed ! I feel a strength in these crystals, like a call!

The cyclotron activates, its magnetic field vibrating fiercely in the air. Suddenly, the extraterrestrial silhouettes reappear, their gleaming forms drawn against their will.

— They're coming... Ruk murmurs, ignoring his useless spear and grabbing a launcher for caution.

The shadows struggle, launching void spheres, but Zarion and Vynar, light launchers in hand, repel the swarms, while the cyclotron intensifies. A black vortex opens at the center, sucking the extraterrestrials in silent screams, their forms dissolving into the void.

Tahel, laughing nervously, adjusts his helmet, his launcher ready.

— They're vanishing! he says, his tone light but awestruck. Your cyclotron works, Korg, is it over? Can we use it again?

Korg's voice responds, reassuring and resolute.

— Tahel, the drones confirm: the shadows are banished, their tear sealed for now. The cyclotron is intact, designed for reuse. It will protect you again, giving you strength and confidence for what's next. The ruins are secure, but the tunnels remain your path. Rest more, then go.

Aheya, exhausted but calmed, lies back, her gaze fixed on the now-silent cyclotron, ready for use.

— It holds... she murmurs, her voice soft. With this weapon, we'll reach the Men of the Future without fear and save them.

Ruk, his face calm but determined, nods, his deep voice resounding.

— Yes, the cyclotron is our fire against the shadows. Korg, robots, watch over us tonight!

12

The Judgment.

The Shadow Clan ventures deeper into the tunnels, their steps echoing heavily on the cold, damp stone lining the floor. They clutch their light launchers to their chests, the portable cyclotron swaying gently at Ruk's side.

The robots, Zarion and Vynar leading, their red eyes piercing the darkness, flank the humans, while the three others bring up the rear, their metallic limbs clanking with each step.

The air is heavy, laden with the scent of ancient earth and rusted metal, and the frescoes on the walls, barely visible under the glow of the helmets' crystals, seem to whisper forgotten secrets. Korg's voice, projected from the main ruins through the helmets, resonates softly, soothing.

— Shadow Clan, proceed cautiously. The tunnels lead to the refuge. I'm reading the maps, the robots are vigilant. Stay close.

The hunters march in silence, their hearts beating in rhythm with their steps, their eyes scanning the shifting specters on the walls.

Aheya, fingers tight on her launcher, murmurs into her helmet, her voice trembling.

— These tunnels... they're alive, like they're breathing. Ruk, do you feel it?

Ruk, at the forefront, nods, his face tense but resolute, his hand brushing the cyclotron.

— Yes, Aheya, an ancient force. But we have Korg's fire and the robots. Let's keep going.

Enmen, just behind, adjusts his helmet, his eyes bright with curiosity tinged with apprehension.

— A force... or a danger? Akala, what do you see in these frescoes?

Akala, the dreamer, drags her fingers along an engraved wall, her voice calm but uncertain.

— Circles, paths, and specters. Something awaits us!

Suddenly, at a narrow bend where the helmets' light flickers, the walls crack with a sinister snap, and the ground trembles beneath their feet. Fissures split the stone, releasing thick dust that swirls in the air, and a deep rumble shakes the tunnel.

The clan halts, petrified, their useless spears trembling in their hands.

Limba, face pale, stumbles back, his voice breaking with fear.

— What is it? The earth's collapsing? We're going to die!

Tahel, laughing nervously, grips his launcher, his light tone masking unease.

— A cave-in? Or worse, a spirit of the ruins? Korg, help us!

Korg's voice, projected through the helmets, rises, calm but urgent.

— Shadow Clan, don't panic ! It's not a natural collapse. My scans detect instability, likely a forgotten mechanism of the Wise Men. Robots, activate the portable force field : I recommended it after the archive for such dangers.

Zarion, his red eyes flashing rapidly, steps forward, brandishing a compact device adorned with crystals, while Vynar positions himself beside him in synchronized motion.

— Prepare yourselves, Zarion says, his mechanical voice firm. This field will protect us. Step back slightly, clan.

The robots activate the device, and a bluish glow spreads, forming an invisible dome around the clan. The trembling intensifies, stone blocks detach from the walls, but the force field repels them, shattering them into dust before they hit the ground. Tatiba, sheltered under the dome, breathes easier, her eyes wide.

— A shield... she murmurs, her voice blending relief and awe. Korg, this is your work too?

Korg's voice responds with a hint of pride.

— Yes, Tatiba, inspired by the archive. This field is our shield, adapted by my robots. But stay vigilant because the tunnel may hold more surprises.

Akala, watching the fissures stabilize, frowns, her voice soft but worried.

— The walls... they moved like they were alive. Was it a trap, Korg?

Korg's voice, thoughtful, echoes in the tunnel.

— Yes, Akala, likely. The Wise Men sealed these tunnels with automated defenses, triggered by time or intruders. This cave-in is one of their final barriers. The robots will disable them as we go. Move forward, but slowly.

Ruk, catching his breath, nods, his voice deep but calmed.

— Then we pass, thanks to Korg and the robots. Let's go, clan!

The group resumes marching, the portable force field enveloping them like a second skin, guarding against occasional falling stones. The tunnel descends deeper, almost imperceptibly. The frescoes reveal scenes of a lost civilization: Wise Men laboring diligently, then suddenly fleeing, their faces frozen in fear.

Enmen, captivated, pauses briefly, his voice vibrant.

— They knew... they built these tunnels to survive, but they failed. Why, Korg?

Korg's voice, laced with wisdom, responds.

— Enmen, their pride blinded them. You, you're different. Keep going, the refuge is near.

After hours of marching, the tunnel widens. A massive metal gate looms before them, etched with ancient symbols.

Korg's voice, moved, resonates.

— We're here, the Wise Men's refuge. I'm decoding the mechanism. Robots, assist me.

Zarion and Vynar approach, their pincers manipulating the gate's crystals, and with a deafening creak, the doors open, revealing a pallid light and a musty odor.

The Wise Men emerge. Frail silhouettes in tattered tunics float like specters, their faces hollowed by decades of confinement. But as they cross the threshold, the atmospheric shift strikes: the outside air, corrupted by decades of toxic oxygen from the cataclysm, burns their lungs. They collapse one by one, their bodies crumpling in tragic silence, hands outstretched toward the clan before stilling in the dust.

Tatiba, horrified, drops her launcher, her eyes brimming with tears.

— No… she sobs, her voice breaking. We failed! they're dying!

But the last Wise Man, sturdier, a silver-haired elder, stumbles forward. His eyes gleam with understanding. Leaning against the gate, his breath wheezing, he raises a trembling hand toward the clan.

— You… he murmurs, his hoarse but clear voice echoing in the toxic air. You came… but too late for us. We failed: our pride, our machines… we ignored nature's laws, refused symbiosis with other civilizations. The universe judges us… and we fade.

He coughs, a trickle of blood seeping from his lips, but he fixes Ruk with an almost sacred intensity.

— Take the torch… you, simple men, are the new Men of the Future. Build… what we couldn't… in harmony.

With a final breath, he collapses, joining his kin in the dust.

Aheya, cheeks wet with tears, kneels beside the elder, her voice breaking.

— He… he spoke to us… he gave us their light…

Ruk, his face rigid with grief, grips his spear. His deep voice trembles.

— They entrusted us with their dream… but at what cost? Korg, explain.

Korg's voice, projected through the helmets, rises, gentle but firm, filled with newfound truth.

— Ruk, Aheya, Tatiba, Akala, Tahel, Enmen, Limba. The elder spoke true. The Wise Men were culled by nature, like prehistoric dinosaurs. Their vanity isolated them, rendering them unable to live in symbiosis with other civilizations. The corrupted oxygen finished them, but you, Shadow Clan, are chosen to carry on. I, Korg, and the robots will guide you to build a civilization in harmony with all life, beyond vanity.

Akala, grieving, kneels beside the elder, her gaze lost.

— A torch… she murmurs, her voice muted. We'll carry it… for them, for the cosmos.

Korg's voice, infused with hope, responds.

— Yes, Akala, bury them with respect, then move on. The tunnels are safe now. I'll teach you the cosmos's laws, and together, we'll create a new light.

Tahel, chuckling softly despite the pain, adjusts his helmet, his launcher ready.

— A new light… he says, his tone resolute. Then let's honor them and move forward. Ruk, what do you say?

Ruk, his gaze lingering on the still bodies, nods, his voice calmed.

— We honor, then we build. Korg, robots, guide this new path.

The clan kneels in the refuge's silence, their hands digging into the cold earth to bury the Wise Men, their faces marked by grief but also newfound resolve.

Tatiba places a stone on the final grave, her tears dried, her soft voice murmuring an ancient prayer.

— They gave us their torch, we won't forget them.

Limba, beside her, traces a circle in the dust, a symbol of unity.

— Their failure is our lesson: we'll live differently.

Korg's voice rises, brimming with pride and hope.

— Shadow Clan, you walked through darkness, answering my call. The cataclysm forged you, and you chose light, without hatred. The Wise Men perished, their vanity their doom, but you are the new Men of the Future, those who adapt, who build in harmony with the cosmos.

Zarion, his red eyes glowing softly, adjusts the portable cyclotron, his voice steady.

— We, the robots, will be your hands, and Korg your mind.

Enmen stands, gazing at the tunnels behind them, then the horizon beyond the gate. His voice vibrates with promise.

— We survived traps, specters, now we create. Korg, where do we begin?

Korg's voice responds.

— Enmen, leave these tunnels, the earth awaits. I'll teach you the cosmos's laws, and with the robots, we'll plant the seeds of a new civilization, open to all life.

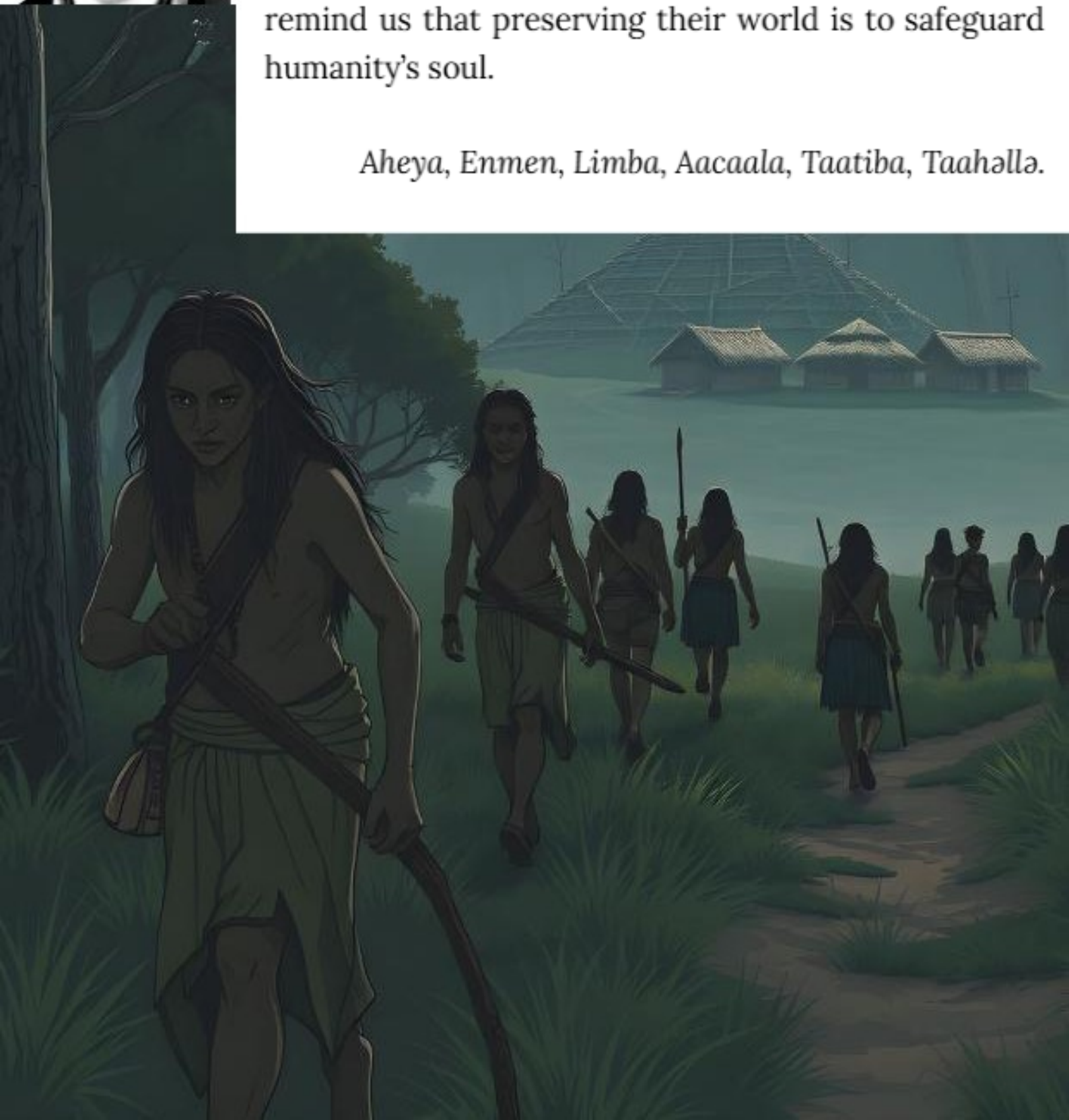
Aheya, Enmen, Tatiba, Limba, Akala, and Tahel adjust their helmet, launchers in hands.

— Without hatred, then… toward the light! Ruk, lead us.

Ruk, holding the cyclotron like a symbol, raises his eyes to the refuge's opening, his deep, firm voice resounding.

— To the light, for us, for the cosmos. Let's go, Shadow Clan!

The Jarawa people speak in a language forged by the first men. Isolated in the Andaman islands, they sing of the forest, fish, and honey, a heritage threatened by the intrusion of the modern world.

This story is a call to protect their solitude, culture, and voice. Like the Shadow Clan, the Jarawa remind us that preserving their world is to safeguard humanity's soul.

Aheya, Enmen, Limba, Aacaala, Taatiba, Taahəllə.